Gunston Classics

THE ROVER BOYS' ON THE PLAINS

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

BOOK # 10

Gunston Classics

Public Domain Series

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Digital Publishing Syndication

EST. 1999

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GUNSTON CLASSICS
PO BOX 5905
BALTIMORE, MD 21282

GUNSTON CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

My Dear Boys: "The Rover Boys on the Plains" is a complete story in itself, but forms the tenth volume of a line known under the general title of "The Rover Boys' Series for Young Americans."

Ten volumes make a great number, and, as I look back, I wonder how I have been able to write so many. As I have said before, when I started this series I had in mind to pen three volumes and possibly a fourth. But no sooner had "The Rover Boys at School," "The Rover Boys on the Ocean," "The Rover Boys in the Jungle" and "The Rover Boys Out West" appeared than there was a demand for another volume, and then more, and so I have had to take the boys from time to time, "On the Great Lakes," "In the Mountains," "On Land and Sea," "In Camp" and "On the River," where we last left them.

The present tale tells of adventures on the mighty Mississippi River, and then on the great plains, where Dick, Tom and Sam, and some of their friends, have a variety of adventures and assist in unraveling the mystery surrounding a lonely ranch. Of course, their old enemy, Baxter, is bound to make himself known, but the Rover boys do not fail to take care of themselves, as of old.

Again, I thank the many thousands who have shown their appreciation of my efforts to amuse and instruct them. I earnestly hope the present volume will not disappoint them.

Affectionately and sincerely yours,

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD.

THE ROVER BOYS ON THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

ON THE HOUSEBOAT

"Say, Tom, what's that big thing coming down the river?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Sam. It's big enough to be a house." replied Tom Rover.

"Maybe it is a house," came from Dick Rover, who was standing beside his brothers on the rear deck of the houseboat which was taking them down the Mississippi River.

"A house?" broke in a distinctly German voice. "Did you mean to said dere vos a house floating der rifer town, Dick Rofer?"

"Why not, Hansy, my boy?" replied fun-loving Tom Rover, before his big brother could answer. "Hasn't a house got a right to take a float if it wants to? Perhaps it's out for its health."

"Ach, you vos choking, Tom!" cried Hans Mueller. "Of a house been der rifer on, dere peen somedings wrong mit him alretty."

"It's a lumber raft, Hans," said Dick. "And a whopping big one, too," he added, as he took another look at the object that was approaching the houseboat.

"Hope it doesn't give us such a close shave as that raft we met two days ago," said Sam anxiously. "I was almost certain they were going to run into us."

"They have got no business to run so close to this houseboat," grumbled Tom. "They know well enough that we can't turn out of our course very well. I think some of those lumbermen are the toughest kind of citizens."

"If they get too close, I'll shout a warning through the megaphone," went on Dick, after a brief pause. "It certainly does look as if they intended to crowd us," he continued anxiously.

"Oh, Dick, do you think there is any danger?" came from a girl who had just joined the crowd.

"Not yet, Dora."

"Perhaps we had better run in close to shore until the raft has passed," continued Dora Stanhope, with an anxious look in her pretty eyes.

"Don't do it!" cried Tom. "We have as much right to the river as they have. Tell 'em to keep their distance, Dick."

"I shall—when they get close enough."

"If that raft hits our houseboat, we'll be smashed to kindling wood," was Sam's comment. "I'd rather they'd give us a wide berth."

The Rover brothers were three in number, Dick being the oldest, fun-loving Tom coming next and Sam coming last. When at home, they lived with their father and their uncle and aunt at Valley Brook Farm, pleasantly located in the heart of New York State. From this farm they had been sent to Putnam Hall, as related in the first volume of this series,

entitled, "The Rover Boys at School." At this institution of learning they had made a large number of friends, and also some enemies.

A short term at Putnam Hall had been followed by a chase on the ocean and then a trip to the jungles of Africa, in search of Mr. Anderson Rover, who has disappeared. Then came a trip out West and one on the great lakes, followed by some adventures during a winter in the mountains.

After being in the mountains, the Rover boys had expected to go back to school, but a scarlet fever scare closed the institution, and they took a trip to the Pacific, as related in "The Rover Boys on Land and Sea," the seventh volume of this series. They were cast away on an island and had many thrilling adventures, but escaped, to receive a warm welcome when they arrived home.

The scarlet fever scare was now a thing of the past, and the boys went back to Putnam Hall, to participate in the annual encampment, as told of in "The Rover Boys in Camp." Here they had plenty of sport, and the outing was voted "the best ever."

What to do during the summer vacation was a question quickly settled by the brothers. Their uncle, Randolph Rover, had taken a houseboat for debt, and it was voted to go aboard this craft, which was located on the Ohio River, and take a trip down that stream, and also down the mighty Mississippi.

"It will be the outing of our lives," said Tom. "We can just take it easy, and float, and float, and float."

The arrangements for the outing were quickly completed. With the Rover boys went their old school chums, "Songbird" Powell, who was always making up doggerel which he called poetry; Hans Mueller, already introduced, and Fred Garrison. The houseboat was a large one, and to make the trip more pleasant, the boys invited two ladies to go along, Mrs. Stanhope and Mrs. Laning. With Mrs. Stanhope came her only daughter, Dora, whom Dick Rover thought the nicest girl in the

world, and with Mrs. Laning came her daughters, Nellie and Grace, intimate friends of Tom and Sam.

As those who have already read "The Rover Boys on the River" know, the trip on the houseboat started pleasantly enough. But, before long, one of their old enemies, Dan Baxter, turned up, accompanied by an evil-minded boy named Lew Flapp. These fellows succeeded in making prisoners of Dora Stanhope and Nellie Laning, and ran off with the houseboat. But they were followed by the Rovers and their friends, and, in the end, the girls were rescued, the houseboat recovered and Lew Flapp was made a prisoner, to be sent East to stand trial for his various misdeeds. Dan Baxter escaped, and for the time being there was no telling what had become of him. But he was destined to show up again, as the chapters to follow will prove.

After the houseboat was once again in the possession of the Rovers and their guests, there was a general jollification on board, lasting several days. All felt much relieved, to think that matters had turned out so well for them.

"We are well out of that mess," had been Dick Rover's comment.

"And I hope we never get into such another," answered Dora Stanhope.
"I was really frightened to death when I was a prisoner."

"I would feel a great deal better if Dan Baxter had been captured."

"Oh, Dick, do you think he will try to harm us further?" and Dora's face paled a trifle.

"Well, he seems to be like a bad penny—he turns up when you least expect it."

"Anyway, he won't have Flapp to aid him."

"That is true. But I never feared Flapp—he was too much of a coward at heart."

"Then you do fear Baxter, Dick?" and Dora looked at her best friend curiously.

"It's not exactly that, Dora. I don't want you to have any trouble. I don't care for myself."

"I shall do my best to keep out of his way. What a pity it is that Baxter can not turn over a new leaf."

"It isn't in him to do so," put in Fred Garrison, who had come up.

"But his father has reformed," said Dora.

"I really think Dan is worse than his father," returned Dick. "There is a certain viciousness about him that is lacking in his father's make-up."

"Dan Baxter doesn't believe in forgiving or forgetting an injury," put in Sam, who had joined the crowd. "Once, after something went wrong, he said he'd get square if it took a hundred years. I believe he remembers that injury yet."

"He might do well, if he'd only settle down to something," said Fred. "He isn't dumb, by any means."

"He is not smart, only cunning, Fred," answered Dick. "In regular business I don't believe he'd ever make his salt."

"Do you think he is still following the houseboat?" was the question put by Songbird Powell.

"I can't say as to that. If he is, he must hustle pretty lively, for we are now making a good many miles a day."

After this conversation, the days had gone by swiftly and pleasantly enough. Soon the broad Ohio River was left behind, and the houseboat started down the Mississippi. Stops were made at various points, and the young folks, as well as the two ladies, enjoyed themselves to the utmost. They had a few friends in the South, and, when-ever they stopped off to see these, they were treated with great cordiality.

"No more troubles of any kind for us," said Sam one day, but he was mistaken. That very afternoon a lumber raft came close to hitting the houseboat, frightening all who chanced to be on the deck at the time.

"Phew!" was Tom's comment. "No more such close shaves for me. That raft might have smashed us to smithereens!"

Two days went by, and the boys and girls enjoyed themselves by going fishing and by watching the sights on the river and along the shore. The weather was ideal for the outing, and they had not a care until the second big lumber raft came into sight, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, and threatened, as the first had done, to run them down.

CHAPTER II

THE BIG LUMBER RAFT

"Py chiminy! dot raft vos coming dis vay so sure like nefer vos!" cried Hans Mueller, after an anxious moment had passed.

"We ought to warn 'em off with a shot-gun," growled Tom. "Even if they don't hit us, they haven't any right to make my hair stand up like quills on the fretful porcupine."

"Vot has der porkerpint to do mit your hair?" questioned Hans innocently.

"You'll soon find out—if that lumber raft hits us, Hansy. Got your life insured?"

"Mine life insured?"

"That's it. If you haven't, better take out a policy for 'steen dollars and some cents, payable at nine cents a week in advance."

"Tom, this is no joking matter," broke in Dick. "Be quiet, till I use the megaphone."

"Dot's it!" cried Hans. "Use dot magnify-phone by all means."

There was a fair-sized megaphone on the houseboat, used to call to persons on shore, if necessary, and, bringing this out, the eldest Rover placed it to his mouth.

"On board the lumber raft!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Sheer off! Don't run us down!"

"We are not running you down," was the surly answer from a man at the front of the raft.

"Yes, you are, and we want you to keep off."

"Go on in toward the west shore and you will be all right," said the man. He was a burly looking individual, with an unusually long nose.

By this time the lumber raft was sweeping closer. The raft and the houseboat were moving in the same direction, and this kept them for the time being apart.

"If you don't keep off, there will be trouble," cried Sam.

"Oh, you boys dry up!" was the reply from the man with the long nose, and now they recognized him as a fellow they had met in a hotel at their last stopping place. The man had had a row with a porter, and had made himself generally disagreeable.

The houseboat was under the immediate command of Captain Starr. The captain, a rather strange individual, was not feeling very well, and had gone off to take a nap. Now it was thought best by all to call him.

"The overgrown wood-choppers!" growled the captain as soon as he had come out on deck and taken in the situation. "Sheer off!" he yelled. "Do you hear?"

"Turn in toward shore," was the answering cry.

"We can't—it's too shallow."

"Is it really too shallow?" asked Dick.

"I think so. We are not in the channel as it is."

"I'm going to get a gun," came from Tom, and off he rushed to secure the firearm.

The raft had now swept so close that several on board could be seen plainly. They were a rough-looking sort, and the man with the long nose was the shrewdest of the lot.

"We'll have to turn in, or we'll be hit!" ejaculated Sam. "Those side logs are bound to strike the cabin!"

He pointed to some timbers that projected over the edge of the raft. They were only a few feet off and might crash into the cabin of the houseboat at any moment.

In anger at being forced to change his course, Captain Starr turned the houseboat toward the bank of the river. Then the big raft began to pass them, just as Tom reappeared, shotgun in hand.

"I ought to have you arrested for this!" stormed Captain Starr. His words were always louder than his actions.

"Bah!" answered the man with the long nose, in derision.

"Maybe you'd like to have a taste of this?" put in Tom, holding up the gun.

"Don't you dare to shoot!" yelled the man, and lost no time in sliding from his seat and out of sight.

At that moment those on the houseboat felt a slight shock, and then the craft's headway was checked.

"What's up now?" cried Dick.

"We're aground, that's what's the matter," muttered Captain Starr. "Those rascals ought to suffer for this!"

In a moment more the big raft had passed the houseboat. The latter now began to swing around with the current.

"I hope we are not stuck in the mud for good," grumbled Fred Garrison.

"Look! look!" burst from Sam's lips. He was pointing to the raft.

"What's up now?" came from several of the others.

"Unless I am mistaken, Dan Baxter is on that raft."

"Baxter!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"He was sitting on that pile of boards in the rear. As soon as he saw me, he slid out of sight."

"Are you sure it was Baxter?" questioned Songbird Powell.

"If it wasn't him, it was his double."

"If it was Baxter, we ought to try to catch him," suggested Fred.

"I don't see how we are going to catch anybody just now," sighed Dick. "We are stuck hard and fast."

"Oh, Dick, are we really aground?" questioned Dora.

"We are that," said Captain Starr.

"Is there any danger?" asked Nellie Laning, who had joined the others, accompanied by her sister Grace.

"No immediate danger, miss. It depends on whether we can get off or not."

"We'll have to get off," said Tom decidedly.

"Rub a dub dub!
We're stuck in the mud
As hard as hard can be!
Shall we ever,
Or shall we never,
Set the houseboat free?" came softly from Songbird Powell.

"Great Caesar, that's a fine thing to make a rhyme about," returned Sam reproachfully.

"Let's make Songbird wade out in the mud and shove us off," suggested
Tom, with a wink at his companions.

"Wade out in the mud?" cried the youth who was given to rhymes. "Not much!"

"Mud bath is the finest thing in the world, Songbird," went on Tom. "Bound to cure hay fever, warts, squint-eye and lots of things."

"Then you go take it yourself," murmured Songbird.

"We'll have to get out the rowboat and see if we can't pull her off," said Captain Starr.

"Yes, and the sooner the better," said Dick. "If we wait, we may get harder aground than ever."

It did not take long to let the rowboat over the side of the *Dora*, as the houseboat was named. Then Dick, Sam, Tom and Fred got in to do the rowing, while the others remained on the houseboat, to try what they could do toward poling off. A line was made fast between the rowboat and the *Dora*, and the boys began to pull away with might and main.

"Is she moving?" asked Dick, after several minutes of hard pulling.

"Not yet," answered Captain Starr. "Keep at it, though."

"Let us shift some of the heavy things on board," suggested Songbird, and this was done. Then the boys rowed with all their might and those on the houseboat used their poles to the best advantage.

"Hurrah! she vos coming!" shouted Hans. "Dot's der time vot you did sometings, ain't it!"

"Keep at it, boys!" came from the captain. "We'll be all right in a few minutes more."

"Mind you, we don't want to tow the houseboat down to New Orleans," said Tom, who was perspiring freely in the warm sun.

"There she goes!" came a moment later. "We are all right now," and a little hurrah went up.

"I wish I had those lumbermen here—I'd give 'em a bit of my mind," said Sam, who felt tired out from the hard rowing. "It was all their fault."

"Of course, it was their fault," answered Dick. "More than likely, though, we'll never meet them again."

"What an awfully long nose one of them had."

"I don't believe that fellow was a lumberman. He wasn't dressed like the others and didn't act like them."

The rowboat was soon placed aboard of the houseboat once more, and the *Dora* continued on her course down the river. All told, a half hour had been lost, and the lumber raft was scarcely a speck in the distance.

"I'd like to know for certain if that was Dan Baxter on board," said Dick to Sam. "If it was, and he saw us, he'll do his best to make trouble again."

"Well, the best we can do, Dick, is to keep our eyes open."

"Do you think that lumber raft will tie up somewhere below here?" asked Tom.

"The raft is certain to tie up somewhere, Tom. But it may go a good many miles before that happens," answered the eldest Rover; and there the subject was for the time being dropped.

CHAPTER III

A "PEPPER" GHOST

Mrs. Stanhope and Mrs. Laning had been taking a nap, and they were much interested when they awoke and learned of what had occurred.

"Let us be thankful that the raft did not run us down," said Dora's mother, who was a widow.

"It was mean to make us run aground," was Mrs. Laning's comment. "Some folks try their best to get others into trouble."

"That fellow with the long nose got out of sight in a hurry when he saw the shotgun," observed Tom.

"Oh, Tom, you wouldn't have shot him, would you?" cried Nellie.

"I only meant to scare him. But, if they had really run us down, I don't know what I would have done."

It was not long after this that the lumber raft passed entirely out of their sight. Gradually the talk changed, and all began to wonder where they were to tie up for the night.

"I did hope to reach Masterville," said Captain Starr. "But I don't think we can make it."

"Do we need anything in particular in the shape of provisions?" asked Dick.

"I don't think so. You might ask Aleck."

The person referred to was a colored man who was in the employ of the Rovers, and had been with the boys on many of their outings. His

full name was Alexander Pop, and he thought the world and all of Dick, Tom and Sam.

"Hullo, Aleck!" called out Dick, going to the cook's galley.

"Yes, sah! Comin', sah!" was the answer, and in an instant Aleck's smiling ebony face showed itself at the doorway.

"Have we got enough provisions on hand until to-morrow?"

"Yes, sah."

"Then we won't have to go ashore for anything?"

"No, sah; less yo' want sumfing very special," and the colored man grinned.

"Are you going to give us a pretty good supper, Aleck?" asked Tom, walking up.

"Lamb chops, sah, an' green peas, sweet potatoes, an' cake an' cut-up peaches."

"That's first-rate, Aleck," said Dick, smiling.

"Any quail on toast?" asked Tom.

"No, sah."

"Any bear steaks, or salmon eggs?"

"Ain't seen none ob dem t'ings yet, Massa Tom."

"How about butterflies' wings on toast?"

"Wha—what's dat?"

"Or milkweed stewed in onion fat?" went on Tom earnestly.

"Gracious sakes alive, sah! I didn't know dat—"

"Or firefly fritters, Aleck. Don't you love fire-fly fritters, especially when they are rolled in lemon skin and cheese?"

"Say, Massa Tom, ain't you a-foolin' dis darkey?"

"Fooling? Why, Aleck, you know I never fool." Tom gave a sigh. "That's the way of the world, when a fellow is trying to do his best." And he walked off, leaving the faithful Aleck staring after him doubtfully. But soon the colored man began to smile to himself.

"Dat's some moah ob his jokes, dat's what dat is," he murmured. "Dat boy couldn't lib, 'less he was playin' a joke on sumbody!"

The houseboat had now gained a portion of the river where the shore was lined with a beautiful forest, and, as the sun began to set over the treetops, all came out on the deck to enjoy the scene.

"If it wasn't for the troubles we have encountered, this would be an ideal trip," said Dora, as she stood by Dick's side.

"Let us forget the troubles, Dora," said the youth softly, and gave her hand a little squeeze. "I am so glad you are with us. If you weren't, I think it would be rather lonely for me."

"Oh, Dick, you mustn't talk so," cried the girl, and blushed. But she was pleased, nevertheless.

Just where the forest ended there was a point of land stretching out into the river, and there it was decided to tie up for the night. An early supper was had, and then about half of the party went ashore—Dick and Dora to take a stroll in the moonlight, and Tom, Sam and some of the others to do a little exploring.

"The forest looks a little bit spooky," said Fred, as they walked along.

"Spooky?" came scornfully from Songbird Powell. "Why, it's grand—fairly breathing the essence of poetry," and then he continued:

"Down in the depths of a forest grand,
Where many a hoary tree doth stand,
And many a little babbling brook
Gives music to each shady nook,
'Tis there I love a walk to take—"

"And step upon a rattlesnake." finished Tom. "Better keep your eyes open, Songbird, or the rattlers will be after you. They love music and poetry, you know."

"Rattlesnakes! Horrible!" shuddered Songbird. "That's enough to drive the poetry out of a fellow for a week."

"Do you think there are any rattlers here?" asked Sam.

"I ton't vos afraid of raddlesnakes alretty," put in Hans. "I vos know a fine vay to kill dem," and his mild eyes began to twinkle.

"What's the way, Hans?" asked Tom.

"First, you got some poison in a pottle."

"Yes."

"Den you go py der voots till you come py Mr. Raddlesnake."

"All right, proceed."

"Den you got dot Mr. Raddlesnake py der neck, oben his mouth und put der boison on der insides. In an hour, Mr. Raddlesnake vos so dead like nefer vos alretty."

"Sold! That's the time Hans caught you, Tom!" exclaimed Sam, and set up a roar.

"Yah, I vos chust vaiting to cotch you, Tom," and now the German youth joined in the hilarity.

"All right, that's one on me," said Tom. "My move next," he added, but under his breath.

"There's a rattlesnake now!" yelled Fred a moment later, and all gave a jump, Hans as lively as the rest. But it was only a small reptile, and harmless, and quickly disappeared from view.

In a clearing, the boys built a fire, and sat around this, telling stories and talking over the events of the day.

From one thing and another the conversation gradually drifted around to ghosts, and Fred told a ghost story that was thrilling in the extreme.

"Don't you believe in ghosts, Hans?" questioned Sam.

"Not much, I ton't," answered the German youth. "Da vos all humbugs alretty."

"Then you wouldn't run if you saw a ghost?" queried Songbird.

"Not von sthep," said Hans positively.

This talk set Tom to thinking, and on the way back to the houseboat he called Sam to his side.

"I've got an idea."

"What is it?" questioned his brother.

"You heard what Hans said about ghosts?"

"To be sure I did."

"Well, I've got an idea for some fun."

"Good for you, Tom."

"We'll fix up a ghost."

"Oh, that's old."

"So it is; but this particular kind of ghost isn't old."

"What is it to be?"

"One full of pepper."

"Pepper?"

"Exactly. And when Hans hammers it—why, look out, that's all."

The matter was talked over for a few minutes, and Sam readily fell in with his brother's ideas. Reaching the houseboat, the pair went to one of the staterooms and procured a sheet and a bolster.

Then Tom ran off to the galley and obtained a box full of pepper. The pepper was sprinkled over the sheet and the bolster.

"Now, we'll take the outfit to Hans' room," said Tom, and this was done without the German youth being aware of what was taking place.

The others were then let into the plot, and just before retiring Tom called Hans to one side.

"Hans, I want to give you a tip," he whispered tragically.

"Vot for?"

"Some of the fellows are going to scare you. They have fixed up a ghost in your room."

"Is dot so?"

"When you go to bed, don't be frightened."

"Not much I von't pe, Tom. Maype I vos hammer dot ghost, hey?"

"That's the talk. Take a switch along and lock your door. Then you can switch the ghost good."

"Ha! ha! dot's a goot blan," roared the German youth. "Maype somepody ton't cotch him!"

A few minutes after that, the boys and the others separated for the night, and Hans retired to his own stateroom.

As it was bright moonlight, no lights had been lit, nor did the German youth make any.

Tom had deceived him completely, and behind his back he carried a heavy switch. He intended to "lather" the ghost good before giving the joker, whoever he might be, a chance to get away.

As he closed the door, he caught sight of something white and ghost-like standing near the head of his berth. He shut the door softly and locked it.

"Oh, my!" he cried. "A ghost! a ghost!" And then he raised his switch and brought it down on the white object with all his might. Blow after blow was delivered in rapid succession, for he wanted to get in as many cracks as possible before the joker should expose himself.

"Dere you vos, you pad ghost!" he cried. "I dink you vos—"

At this point Hans stopped short. Something had entered his nose—something that tickled exceedingly.

"Ker-chew! ker-chew!" he sneezed. "Vot is—ker-chew! I dink—ker-chew! Oh, my! Ker-chew! I vos schneeze mine head—ker-chew! Stop dot, somepody—ker-chew! Oh, dear—kerchew! Oben der door—ker-chew!"

Blinded, and sneezing violently, Hans dropped his switch and made for the door. Throwing it wide open, he ran out to get some pure air, for the stateroom was filled with floating pepper.

"I fix somepody for dis—ker-chew!" he roared. "Chust vait, you chokers!"

Then he caught sight of Tom, who stood nearby, grinning.

"Dot vos your drick!" he went on. "Chust you come here!"

"Thank you, not to-night, Hansy, my dear boy," said the joker, keeping at a safe distance.

"Vell, den, you go 'long mit your old ghost," went on Hans, and, picking up the peppered bolster and sheet, he threw them into Tom's room, where the fun-loving youth had the pleasure of disposing of the mess as best he could.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE WITH NEGROES

"The rolling, the rolling,
The rolling river for me!
The rolling river, the rolling river,
That carries us down to the sea!"

So sang Songbird Powell the next morning when he came out on deck after a refreshing night's rest.

"Songbird, you're a regular lark," remarked Dick.

"I feel like one," was the answer. "Who wouldn't feel good on such a glorious morning as this?"

"Maype you didn't haf some ghosts drouble you?" put in Hans with a grin.

"Forget it, Hans," answered Dick. "It's too fine a morning to think of ghosts."

It was indeed a glorious morning, clear and balmy. The ladies of the party were much pleased, and so were the girls. All gathered on the deck to take in the sights before breakfast was announced by Aleck.

A big schooner was passing with all sails set, and, not long after this, a large steamer, bound up the Mississippi, hove into sight.

"Now, we'll get some big swells," remarked Sam, and he was right. Soon the houseboat began to rock in a fashion that pleased the boys, but alarmed the girls.

"When the houseboat rocks like that, I'm always afraid we'll be swamped," said Grace.

"There is little danger of that," said Captain Starr. "The wash would have to be much heavier before it could do any damage."

The morning passed pleasantly enough. The ladies spent the time over their fancy work, while the girls and boys read, played games and also sang and played. There was a piano on the *Dora*, and the boys had a guitar and a banjo along.

They were at dinner and discussing their next stopping place, when, without warning, there came a shock that threw Aleck flat on the floor, with a trayful of cup-custards over him.

"Fo' de lan' sake!" gasped the colored man. "Has we struck a stone wall?"

"Whow!" ejaculated Fred, who had had some hot coffee spilled on his knee. "This isn't pleasant, I can tell you."

Dick was already running on deck, and the others followed. They saw that Captain Starr's face was full of concern. Not another craft of any kind was in sight, and they were a good two hundred feet from shore.

"Didn't we strike something, Captain?" asked the eldest Rover.

"Reckon we did, sir," was the answer.

"What?"

"A sunken tree, most likely. They are the worst things to be met with on the Mississippi. More than one boat has been sunk by a hidden tree trunk."

"Did the snag poke a hole into us?" asked Tom. "If it did, we had better make for shore."

"I'll look around and see," said the captain, and did so, accompanied by the boys and Aleck. For the time being, dinner was forgotten.

Fortunately, no great damage had been done. One side board had been loosened, but this was easily nailed tight, and then the houseboat proceeded on her way as before.

"I've heard of boats being wrecked by these snags," said Songbird.

"One boat I was on, some fifteen years ago, was wrecked that way," said Captain Starr. "She was running at full speed, when we struck a big tree that had rather a sharp point. The point ran through into the cabin and killed two people, and the boat sank in ten minutes."

"Excuse me from such a disaster as that," was Fred's comment, while Nellie, who had heard the story, shuddered.

That evening, they tied up close to the village of Canston. Not far south was a large plantation, employing a great number of negroes, and some of these came down to take a look at the houseboat.

As soon as the *Dora* was tied up, Captain Starr made a thorough examination of the craft, to make certain that she had received no injury below the water-line. Dick accompanied him, and so did Songbird.

"She is O. K.," announced the captain. "There isn't a leak as big as a flea anywhere."

Aleck, Tom and Sam went down into the village to procure some stores for the houseboat, and while there learned that there had been a row at the plantation and two negroes had been seriously hurt. As a consequence of the quarrel, one burly negro called Watermelon Pete had run away.

"He's a bad egg, that Watermelon Pete," said the storekeeper in speaking of the affair. "I wish he'd leave this locality for good."

When the boys got back to the houseboat, they found the others hunting all over the *Dora* with lanterns.

"What are you looking for?" asked Tom.

"Grace thinks she saw a big negro come on board," answered Dick. "We are trying to root him out."

The houseboat was searched from end to end, but nothing could be discovered of any intruder.

"Must have sneaked off again," said Sam. "If he did, I hope he didn't steal anything."

"We'll keep our eyes open after this," said Captain Starr.

The night passed quietly enough, but, for some reason she could not explain, Grace awoke long before the others. She tried to go to sleep again, but, finding that a failure, dressed and went out on the deck.

She had been out only a few minutes, when, on walking past the dining-room window, she saw a sight that filled her with amazement. By the closet was a burly negro, filling a carpetbag with silverware!

"Oh!" she cried. "Stop that!"

At the sound of her voice, the burly negro turned and scowled viciously at her.

"Yo' dun keep quiet!" he said in a low, intense voice.

"I shall not," answered Grace. "Help, some-body!" she called.

"Hush up, yo'!" fairly hissed the burly intruder, and sprang for the doorway. In another moment he had Grace by the arm. "Don't yo' make anudder sound, or yo'll git sumfing yo' won't lak!"

"Oh!" gasped the poor girl. She wanted to say more, but the words stuck in her throat. The negro still, held her, and his grasp was like that of steel.

"Are yo' gwine to shut up?" asked the intruder.

"Le—let me go, please!"

"Ain't gwine to let yer go. Be still now, heah?"

Grace did hear, and, as the negro glowered at her, her heart almost stopped beating. She gazed around, and so did the negro. Not another person was in sight.

"Come into de room," went on the negro after a painful pause, and he literally dragged her forward to the door. "If yo' be still, yo' won't git hurt."

Holding her with one hand, he continued to fill his carpetbag with the other. Spoons, knives and forks were rapidly stowed away, and they were followed by some napkin rings and other articles of value.

As the negro worked, Grace recovered some of her self-possession. She did not dare to cry out, and tried to think of some other method of arousing the others on the boat. Her eyes fell upon a bell pull hanging from the wall and, on the sly, she gave it a violent jerk.

The rope connected with a bell in the cook's galley. This was close to where Aleck was sleeping, and it caused the cook to arouse with a start.

"Dis chile mus' hab done overslept hisself," he exclaimed, and then, as the bell rang once more, he sprang up in a hurry. "Sumt'ing wrong, dat's suah as yo're boahn!"

Throwing himself into some of his clothing, he ran out on deck and to the dining-room. One glance was enough, and he raised a shout which aroused everybody on the houseboat.

The shout told the intruder that his game was up, and, carpetbag in hand, he started to run away. But Aleck put out his foot, and the other negro went sprawling at full length.

"Yo' stay right dar!" roared Aleck Pop wrathfully. "Don't yo' 'tempt to git away, nohow, 'less yo' want to go to yo' own funeral."

"Yo' ain't gwine ter stop me!" yelled the thief, and sprang up, hurling the cook to one side. Then he started for the shore.

By this time Sam was coming out of his state-room. He saw the fleeing negro and made after him, catching the rascal just as he was about to leap ashore.

"Not so fast!" he sang out, and caught him by the arm.

"Yo' can't hole me!" stormed the burly fellow, and tried to twist himself loose. But, before he could break away, Captain Starr was at hand, quickly followed by Tom and Hans.

"Vot's der madder, vos he a robber?" asked Hans. "Schoot him der sphot on!"

"Git back, dar, I'se a dangerous coon!" ejaculated the burly negro, and suddenly produced a big revolver of the old civil war kind. "Don't dare lay han's on me ag'in!"

At the sight of the pistol, all fell back, and in a twinkling the negro was over the side and running for the nearest patch of woods.

"Let us go after him," said Dick, and the others agreed. But pursuit was useless, the burly negro was gone. Later they learned that he was Watermelon Pete, the rascal who had gotten into a row at the nearby plantation.

"Are you hurt, Grace?" was Sam's first question after the chase had come to an end.

"No, but that colored man nearly scared the life out of me," she answered, and then told her story.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again," said Fred.

"Most likely not," answered Dick. But he was mistaken. He was to meet Watermelon Pete, and under circumstances as surprising as any that he had yet encountered.

"Well, there is one satisfaction," remarked Songbird. "He didn't get away with any of the stuff."

"No, but he mussed de dinin'-room all up!" growled Aleck. "An' dat silber has got to be shined up ag'in befoah we kin use it."

During the day, several half-intoxicated colored men came on board of the *Dora* and made it decidedly unpleasant for all hands.

"We may as well get out of here," said Dick, and the others agreed with him.

Two negroes were on board at the time, and Captain Starr ordered them ashore.

"Give us some rum, an' we'll go," answered one of them impudently.

"You're going, and without any rum!" cried Dick wrathfully, and ran the colored man to the gangplank. Sam and Tom caught hold of the other colored man and did likewise.

"Let go ob me!" roared one of the fellows, and then both of them began to struggle and use language not fit for polite ears to hear.

"Dump them into the river—the bath will do them good," suggested Songbird, and in a trice this was accomplished, and both went down with a loud splash. By the time they had managed to crawl to the shore through the mud, the houseboat was a good distance out into the stream. The negroes shouted and shook their fists, but the Rovers and their friends, and even Aleck, laughed at them.

"Dem fool niggers don't know nuffin'," growled the cook. "I'se 'shamed ob 'em, I is!"

"Perhaps they won't be so fresh when another houseboat comes along," said Fred.

"Or else they'll do their best to get square," put in Tom.

The journey down the river was continued, and soon the plantation and the village were left far in the distance.

CHAPTER V

DAN BAXTER APPEARS

Two days later found the houseboat moored to one of the docks at a small city in Arkansas. It was a bustling place of perhaps four thousand inhabitants and commanded a fair river trade.

The whole party was willing enough to go ashore, and the Rover boys hired several carriages, in which all were driven around to various points of interest.

"I'll tell you what I wouldn't mind doing," said Sam, while driving around. "I'd like to get on horseback and take a trip out on the plains."

"Perhaps we can do that before this trip comes to an end," answered Dick. "You must remember, we have a good part of our outing before us."

There was a parade in the town that day, and they watched this with interest. Then the girls and the ladies went back to the houseboat, leaving the boys to continue their rambles.

"I see some lumber rafts here," said Sam. "I wonder if that one stopped here that tried to run us down?"

"It might be," answered Fred.

Dick was out buying some special supplies, and his errand took him to a quarter of the town which was by no means of the better sort. As he hurried along, he heard several voices in dispute.

"You must settle that bill at the hotel," a heavy voice was saying.

"You can't leave us until you do settle," said a second voice.

"I paid my bill! I am not going to pay for you—I didn't invite you to come with me," came from a third person.

Dick thought he recognized that voice, and, looking in the direction, was astonished to see Dan Baxter. The bully was in the hands of two lumbermen, who held him by the arm.

"He must be in trouble," thought Dick, and he was right. Soon the dispute waxed hot, and one of the men hit Baxter in the face.

"Stop that!" cried Dick, running up. "Stop it, I say!"

At the sound of his voice, the men started back in alarm.

"He must be the new sheriff," whispered one. "They say he looks like a boy!"

"Then we had better light out," said the second lumberman, and on the instant both took to their heels and disappeared around a corner.

When Dick reached Dan Baxter's side, he found the former bully of Putnam Hall pale and much agitated. He, too, wanted to run away, but Dick held him.

"So we meet again, Baxter?"

"Let go of me!" growled the bully.

"What are you doing here?"

"That's my business."

"What were the men doing?"

"They wanted me to pay their hotel bill for them, but I didn't propose to do it."

"Do you know that Lew Flapp is under arrest?"

"I don't care."

"I think I'll have to have you arrested, too."

"Not much, Dick Rover!"

"You came down the river on that big lumber raft, didn't you?"

"What if I did?"

"Those rascals did their best to run us down."

"Ha! ha! They gave you a fine scare, didn't they?" and the bully laughed boisterously.

"Did the raft stop here?"

"No, but I did."

"Well, you had better come with me, Dan."

"Where to?"

"The lock-up."

"Never!" The big bully drew back. "You let me alone."

Dick caught hold of Baxter once more, but now the bully hauled off and hit him a stinging blow on the chin. The eldest Rover retaliated by a blow that blackened the bully's left eye. Then they clinched and rolled on the ground.

"Hi, what's the matter here?" called out a planter, running up at this moment.

"He is a thief!" cried Dan Baxter. "Take him off of me!"

"A thief, eh?" said the planter, and he caught Dick by the arm. "Come, let him up, you rascal!"

He was a powerful man, and hauled Dick back with ease. In a trice Dan Baxter scrambled up and drew back a few paces.

"I'll get an officer," he called out, and ran off, to disappear down an alleyway between a group of negro shanties.

"Come after him," said Dick. "He is the real thief. You have blundered."

"You can't fool me, suh," said the planter firmly.—

"What, won't you come after him?"

"Nary a step. I allow I know a thief when I see one."

"Do you mean that for me?"

"I surtainly do, suh."

"Well, you're a big fool, that's all I have to say," cried Dick, and, watching his chance, he got out of the planter's clutches and ran after Dan Baxter.

The chase led into the worst portion of the town, but Dick did not give up until a good hour had passed. Then he returned to the houseboat much downcast, and told his story.

"And the worst of it is, my watch is missing," he announced.

"Perhaps you dropped it during the struggle," suggested Songbird.

"Either that, or Dan Baxter got his fist on it while we were talking. He is bad enough now to do almost anything."

"Better go back and see if you can't find the watch," said Tom. "I'll go with you."

They walked to the spot and made a thorough search, but the watch failed to come to light. Dick gave a long sigh.

"I'm out that timepiece, and I guess for good," he murmured.

They were about to return to the houseboat, when Dick saw the planter approaching once more.

"Ha, so you have come back, suh!" he cried.

"Did you see anything of my watch?" remanded Dick sharply.

"Your watch?"

"Yes; it's gone."

"I saw nothing of a watch."

"I suppose that other fellow came back with an officer, didn't he?" went on the eldest Rover sarcastically.

"I did not—ah—see him, suh."

"I'm out my watch, all because of your foolishness."

"Suh?"

"You needn't 'suh' me, I mean what I said. My watch is gone. If you didn't take it yourself, you helped that fellow to get away with it."

"This to me, suh! me, Colonel Jackson Gibbs, suh, of the Sudley Light Artillery, suh! Infamous, suh!"

"So is the loss of my watch infamous."

"I shall make a complaint, suh, to the authorities."

"Go ahead, and tell them that I lost my watch, too," and walked off, leaving Colonel Jackson Gibbs of the Sudley Light Artillery gazing after him in amazement.

"Do you think he will make more trouble?" asked Tom.

"Not he. He is too scared that I will hold him responsible for the loss of the watch." And Dick was right; they never did hear of the planter again.

That night, all on board did nothing but talk about Dan Baxter and the way he had managed to escape.

"He is as bad as Paddy's flea," said Dora. "When you put your finger on him, he isn't there."

The houseboat left the town the following afternoon, and the course was now down the Mississippi in the direction of a village called

Braxbury, where Mrs. Stanhope had some friends of many years' standing.

"They used to have quite a plantation," said the lady. "If they still have it, we'll have a good chance for a nice time on shore."

"And we can go out for that ride on the prairies," added Sam.

"Want to scalp a few noble red men?" asked Tom, with a wink.

"No red men in mine, Tom. But wouldn't you like an outing of that sort, just for a change?"

"Don't know but what I would. But we couldn't take the girls along very well."

"No, we could leave them with their friends at the plantation."

On the following day it began to rain, and all had to keep to the cabin of the houseboat. At first, the rain came down lightly, but towards noon it poured in torrents. Out on the river the weather grew so thick that they could not see a hundred feet in any direction.

"Better run for the shore and tie up," said Dick to Captain Starr. "We don't want to run the risk of a collision, especially when our time's our own."

"I was just going to suggest it," said the skipper of the *Dora*, and soon they were turning toward shore. A good landing place was found and the houseboat was tied up near several large trees in that vicinity.

Instead of abating, the storm kept increasing in violence. So far, there had been but little thunder and lightning, but now several vivid flashes lit up the sky, and some sharp cracks made the girls jump.

"Oh, I detest a thunder storm," cried Nellie. "I wish it was over."

"So do I," answered Dora. "But I suppose we have got to make the best of it."

"Do not sit so close to an open window," said Mrs. Laning.

"I was going to close the window," came from Mrs. Stanhope. "I never sit with a window open during such a storm as this." And then the window was closed, and also the door.

"I'm going out for some fresh air," said Tom a little later, when the worst of the lightning seemed to be over. "I hate to be cooped up like a chicken in a hen-house." And, getting out his rain-coat, he went on deck, and presently Dick followed him.

"This will make the river swell up," remarked Dick, gazing around curiously. "Gracious, how it pours!"

"The wind is rising. That's a sign it is going to clear up."

"Not always, Tom. I think this storm will last all day, and perhaps to-night, too."

The boys walked from one end of the houseboat to the other and gazed out on the rolling river. Then a gust of wind almost took them from their feet.

"Phew! we can't stand much of this," observed Dick. "We'll get drenched in spite of our rain-coats. I think—"

Dick got no further, for at that moment there was a weird flash of lightning, followed by an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Then came a crash of another kind.

"Look out! One of the trees is coming down on the houseboat!" ejaculated
Dick.

As he uttered the words another crash followed, and down came the trunk of a big tree, cutting into the companion ladder and the cabin of the *Dora*. One of the branches of the tree swept over poor Tom, and before he could save himself, he was hurled into the river.

CHAPTER VI

THE EFFECTS OF A BIG STORM

"Tom!" cried Dick, as he saw his brother swept from view.

There was no answer to this call, and, much alarmed, the eldest Rover leaped over a limb of the fallen tree and ran to the edge of the houseboat.

The rain was again coming down in torrents and for the moment Dick could see little or nothing. He heard a cry from the cabin of the *Dora*, and this increased his dismay.

At last he caught sight of Tom's head, about ten feet away from the houseboat. A glance showed him that his brother was unconscious and on the point of sinking again.

"I must save him!" muttered Dick to himself, and, without an instant's hesitation, he leaped overboard.

"Dick! Tom!" The cry was uttered by Sam as he came running out of the houseboat, hatless and in his shirt sleeves.

The fallen tree obstructed his view, and it was several seconds before he caught sight of his brothers in the water.

"Dick!" he yelled. "What's the matter?"

"Throw me a rope," was the answer, and it did not take Sam long to obey instructions. Then Dick caught Tom under the shoulders, and both were hauled back to the side of the *Dora*.

"Did the tree knock you overboard?" asked Sam anxiously.

"It knocked Tom over," answered Dick.

Just as he was placed on deck again, Tom opened his eyes and stared around him.

"Who—where am I?" he demanded faintly.

"You are safe, Tom," answered Dick kindly. "Don't you remember, the tree knocked you overboard?"

"Oh!" The fun-loving Rover drew a long breath. "Did you fish me out?"

"I jumped in after you, and Sam fished us both out."

"Good enough."

By this time some of the others were stepping forth from the wreck of the cabin. All were more or less excited, and the girls and ladies came out hatless and coatless despite the rain, which now seemed to come down with renewed fury, as if to add to their misery.

"Is anybody hurt?" demanded Dick.

"I was hit by a broken board," answered Mrs. Laning. "But it scared me more than anything else."

"One of the broken windows came in on me and covered me with glass," came from Songbird. "But wasn't that a crack of thunder! I thought it was the crack of doom!"

"And were you really hurled overboard?" asked Nellie, rushing up to Tom and almost embracing him. "You poor boy! How glad I am that you were not drowned!"

"Well, come to think of it, I'm glad myself," he returned with a little smile.

"Oh, Tom, it's nothing to joke about!"

"That is true, Nellie."

"Say, I ton't vont no more oxcitements like dot!" cried Hans. "I vos schared out of mine vits alretty, ain't it!"

"We were all scared," said Fred. "But hadn't we better get inside again? We are all getting wet to the skin."

"The cabin is in an awful mess," declared Dora, and she told the truth. Daylight was streaming through a hole in one corner and the rain was entering in a stream.

"Let us get a tarpaulin and cover that hole," said Dick. "I'll do it," he added. "I can't get any wetter than I am," and he gave a short laugh.

"And I'll help," said Tom, who had recovered rapidly from his involuntary bath.

"We shall need a carpenter to make repairs," said Captain Starr, who had been working to shove off the fallen tree. "This smash-up is a pretty bad one."

The boys remained outside, and all went to work to remove the tree trunk and to cover the hole with a heavy tarpaulin. It was a task lasting the best part of an hour, and when it had come to an end, the rain was slackening up.

"We shall certainly have to lay up somewhere for repairs," said Fred. "We can't continue the journey in this condition."

"Let us hire a carpenter at the next town we stop at," suggested Sam, and to this they agreed.

The mess in the cabin was left for Aleck to clean up, and then the ladies and the girls straightened things out as best they could. As soon as the storm cleared away, the journey down the Mississippi was continued.

"I can't help but think of what might have happened if that stroke of lightning had hit the houseboat," said Songbird. "It makes me shiver."

"We certainly had a narrow escape," answered Dora. "I never wish to get quite so close to another stroke."

On the following day, they stopped at a place which I shall call Ramontown. From one of the dock owners, they learned where they

could find a master carpenter, and they called upon this individual and had him look at the damage done.

"I can fix up the craft as good as she ever was," said he. "But it will take at least a week, and it will take several days more to give her two good coats of paint."

The matter was talked over, and they decided to remain tied up and have the houseboat put in first-class condition once more. Then Mrs. Stanhope sent a long letter to her friends at Braxbury, stating she would call with some others, and mentioned the houseboat trip.

Just twenty-four hours later, a middle-aged man came down to the houseboat and shook hands warmly. His name was Carson Denton and he was the husband of Mrs. Stanhope's friend.

"I am more than glad to see you," he said. "I just got your letter to Clara, and as she wanted me to open any letter that might be at the Braxbury post-office for her, I read it. We do not live in Braxbury any longer, but further west, at a place called Silver Creek, where I have a good-sized plantation."

"Is that so? When did you move, Mr. Denton?"

"Only a few weeks ago, which accounts for you not having known of the change. I had a good chance to trade my place in town for a plantation, or ranch, as my son Bob calls it, and I took it. We have a fine place, and Clara will be much pleased, I am sure, to have you and your friends pay us a visit."

"Oh, mamma, let us go!" cried Dora. "I don't wish to stay on the houseboat while the repairs are being made."

The matter was talked over for an hour, and the boys and girls took Mr. Denton over the houseboat, from end to end.

"I've heard of you Rover boys," said he to Dick, Tom and Sam. "Mrs. Stanhope has written to us about you, and how you once saved her from a fellow named Josiah Crabtree. If you and your chums wish to visit our

place, I'd like you to do so. I've got a son Bob who, I know, would like to meet you."

"Well, I wouldn't mind taking a trip inland," answered Dick.

"Can't we go on horseback?" put in Sam eagerly.

"We might do that."

"Certainly, you could make the trip in that way," said Mr. Denton. "But it would take some time, for the roads are not of the best down here. We usually take a train as far as Docker Crossing, and then ride the rest of the distance, twelve miles, in a carriage or on horseback."

"I'll tell you what's let do," suggested Tom. "The girls and the ladies can go with Mr. Denton on the train, and all us boys can hire horses and make the trip that way. We can leave Captain Starr and Aleck in charge of the houseboat until we get back. We need not hurry ourselves, for our time is our own."

When talked over, this plan met with universal approval, and it was decided to put it into execution without delay. Mr. Denton wished them to make an extended stay at his plantation, and the boys decided to take their own time in getting there.

"It will be just the outing on horseback that I have been looking for," said Sam. "I hope we have nothing but clear weather."

"We ought to have, after such a storm," said Fred. "See how clear the sky is to-day."

"That trip to the plantation on horseback will take about five days," said Dick. "That will make quite an outing."

"Puts me in mind of our trip out West," said Tom. "What are we going to do when night comes on? Go to some ranch, or make our own camp?"

"Oh, let us go into our own camp!" cried Songbird. "It will be such fun!"

"That's the talk," chimed in Sam.

"We can camp out on the way if the weather proves good," decided Dick. "But if it rains good and hard, I reckon all of you will be glad enough to get under cover."

"Pooh! who's afraid of a little rain," put in Fred. "Why, that will make us grow!"

So the talk ran on, and finally all arrangements were completed for the trip inland. Aleck Pop was sorry he could not accompany the boys, but Dick thought it best that he remain behind.

"You know how Captain Starr is, Aleck—a bit queer at times. The *Dora* is a valuable craft, and I shall feel safer if I know you are helping to keep watch over her."

"All right, Massa Dick. I will do my best to see dat no harm comes to de houseboat. But I'd like to be wid you boys, no use er talkin'."

"Perhaps you can go along next time," said Dick, and with this the colored man had to be content.

It did not take the ladies and the girls long to get ready for the trip, and they left on the following morning, the boys going to the railroad station to see them off. There was a hearty handshake all around. Then the train came in and the party was off with a waving of handkerchiefs.

"And now to get ready for our own start," came from Tom.

Through the carpenter who had taken the contract to repair the houseboat, they were introduced to a man who owned a number of horses, and for a proper consideration this individual let them have the use of the steeds they wanted. They were all good animals and used to the saddle, and the man guaranteed that the lads would not have any trouble whatever with them.

"But I want to tell you beforehand that the road is none of the best," said the horse owner. "It is pretty fair for the first fifteen miles or so, but then it is bad for thirty miles after that. You want to beware of sink holes."

"We've been on some pretty bad roads before this," answered Sam. "I guess we'll know enough to take care of ourselves."

"Well, I didn't think there would be any harm in telling you."

"Oh, that's all right."

The Rover boys were so used to traveling and to camping out that they knew exactly what to take along. The other lads were also well informed, because of the military encampments in which they had participated. They carried only what was necessary, so that their steeds might not be too heavily burdened.

"Looks like yo' was ready fo' a reg'lar outin'," remarked Aleck when they were ready for a start. "I dun hopes yo' all come back safe and sound."

"Why, of course we'll come back safe and sound!" exclaimed Sam. "What put that into your noddle, Aleck?"

"I dunno, Massa Sam. But dis am a queer country, ain't it?"

"Not in the least. We expect to have a fine outing, and nothing else."

"And we'll be back here inside of two weeks," added Dick. "That is, unless we make up our minds to stay at Mr. Denton's place for a while."

"All right, sah."

"And when we get back, I shall expect to see the houseboat in first-class order," continued Dick to Captain Starr.

"I shall do my best," answered the captain.

A moment later, all of the boys mounted their horses and the journey inland was begun. Little did they dream of the strange adventures and perils which lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER VII

A DAY ON THE ROAD

"Vot kind of a horse you vos call dis, annahow?"

The question came from Hans, after about four miles of the journey had been covered. So far, his steed had acted well enough, but now, without warning, the animal began to balk and paw the turf.

"Something is wrong, that is certain," replied Dick. "Perhaps you haven't got a tight enough rein, Hans."

"Dot reins vos so tight as nefer vos. I dink dis horse got somedings der madder mit him."

As the German boy finished, he gave the horse a slap on the neck with his hands. In a twinkling, up came the steed's hind heels, and poor Hans slid out of the saddle and down to the neck.

"Voah, dere!" he bawled. "Voah, I said! Vot you vants to do, annahow, drow me your head ofer? Sthop, und do it kvick!"

But the horse did not stop. Instead, he began to back, and then of a sudden he leaped high up in the air, to come down on all fours with a thump that nearly jounced poor Hans to pieces.

"Hello, Hans has got a bucking bronco!" cried Tom. "Hans, what will you take for him?"

"I gif him avay!" bawled the poor German youth. "Oh!"

For the steed had made another leap, and now Hans went over his neck in a jiffy, to land in a heap of dust on the side of the road. Then the horse took to his heels and disappeared up the trail like a flash.

"Are you hurt?" questioned Dick, leaping to the ground and running to the German youth's assistance.

"Vere is dot horse?" sang out Hans as he scrambled up and wiped the dust from his mouth and eyes. He was not injured, but was greatly excited.

"The horse has run away."

"Vell, I nefer! Go after him, somepotty!"

"I'll go after him!" cried Tom.

"So will I," added Fred, and away they sped, with Sam and Songbird after them.

"Be careful!" called Dick. "That horse may prove to be a pretty high-strung beast."

"I think I can manage him," cried Tom. "But we have got to locate him first."

Those in pursuit of the horse had to travel the best part of a mile before they came in sight of the animal, quietly grazing by the roadside.

"Looks as meek as a lamb," observed Fred. "Whoa, there!" he called out.

At the call, the horse pricked up his ears and looked at them curiously. Then he took half a dozen steps forward.

"He is going to run away again!" came in a warning from Songbird.

"Not to-day!" sang out Tom, and riding forward, he leaned over and caught the dangling reins. Then, watching his chance, he leaped into the other saddle.

Scarcely had he done this, than the runaway steed began to prance, and kicked up his heels as before. But Tom was on guard, and try his best, the horse could not dislodge the boy.

"Beware, Tom!" cried Sam. "Don't let him throw you, or he may step on you!"

"I don't intend to let him throw me!" was the panting answer.

Finding he could not throw Tom, the horse adopted new tactics. He gave a sudden bound forward and was off with the speed of the wind.

"He is running away with Tom!"

On and on went the steed, and Tom did his best to pull him in, but without result. Then the fun-loving youth smiled grimly and shut his teeth hard.

"All right, Old Fireworks, if you want to run, I'll give you all you want of it," he murmured.

On and on they flew, until a bend in the road shut off the others from view. A mile was covered, and the horse showed signs of slackening his speed.

"No, you don't," said Tom. "You wanted to run, now keep it up for a while," and he slapped the animal vigorously.

Away went the horse, and another quarter of a mile was passed. Then the horse slackened up once more.

"Another run, please," said Tom, and slapped him as before. The horse went on, but at a reduced speed, and came to a halt before another quarter mile was passed.

"Had about enough, eh?" questioned Tom. "Well, you can run a little more, just for good measure."

By the time the next run came to an end, the horse was covered with foam and tired out, for the road was very rough. Tom now turned him back and made him journey along at a fairly good rate of speed.

"Well, I declare, here comes Tom back!" cried Fred on catching sight of the fun-loving Rover. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit."

"And the horse?" asked Sam.

"As meek as a lamb—shouldn't wish for a better animal. He wanted a little run, that's all, and I gave it to him."

Soon Dick came up, with Hans riding behind him. The German boy looked at the captured horse with awe.

"Did he bite you?" he questioned.

"No."

"Didn't he hurt you at all?"

"Nary a hurt, Hansy."

"Vonderful!"

"Do you want him back?"

"Not for a dousand tollars, Tom. Of I got to ride him, I valk," continued Hans decidedly.

"Then, supposing you try my horse. He is gentle enough."

"Ton't you been afraid of dot beast?"

"No."

"All right, den, I dook your horse. But of you got killed, it ton't vos mine funeral," added Hans warningly.

The animal Tom had been riding was close by, and soon the German youth was in the saddle and the journey was resumed. They could not go fast, however, for Tom's horse was all but exhausted.

"I think he has learned his lesson," said Tom to his brothers. And so it proved, for after that single "kick-up," the horse gave them no further trouble.

About four o'clock that afternoon, they rode into a place called Harpertown, which was something of a horse-trading center. Some of the horse dealers thought they had come in to do some trading, but lost interest when the boys told them that they were simply on a journey to the Denton plantation.

"We may as well stop here for a while," said Sam. "Perhaps we can get a good supper at the hotel."

"Thought we were going to camp out," remarked Fred. "Build our own camp fire, and all that?"

"We can try that to-morrow, when we are among the hills," said Dick, and by a vote it was decided to stay in Harpertown for supper.

They put up their horses at the livery stable attached to the hotel, and then went to the lavatory to wash up. On coming out and going to the general room of the hostelry, Dick ran into a man who looked familiar to him.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Monday?" he cried, and put out his hand.

The man looked startled at being addressed so unexpectedly. Then he recognized Dick, and smiled faintly.

"How do you do, Dick Rover?" he said. "I didn't expect to run across you down here."

"Are you at work here, Mr. Monday?"

"Hush! Please do not mention my name," said James Monday hastily. He was a detective who had once done some work for Dick's father, after which he had given up his private practice to take a position with the United States Government.

"All right, just as you please." Dick lowered his voice. "I suppose you are on a case down here?"

James Monday nodded.

"Can I help you in any way?"

"I think not, Rover. Where are you bound?"

"To a plantation about a hundred miles from here," and the eldest Rover gave a few particulars.

"Well, I wish you luck," said the government detective. "Now, do me a favor, will you?" he asked earnestly. "Don't act as if you know me, and don't tell anybody who I am."

"I'll comply willingly."

"If your brothers recognize me, ask them to do the same."

"I will."

"I am looking up some rascals and I don't want them to get on to the fact that I am a detective."

"I understand."

At that moment a heavy-set individual with a shock of bushy hair came slouching in. At once James Monday took his departure, the newcomer gazing after him curiously.

Dick waited a moment, and then rejoined Sam and Tom.

"Dick, we just caught sight of a man we know," said Sam. "Can you guess whom?"

"Mr. Day-of-the-week," put in Tom.

Dick put up his hand warningly.

"Don't mention that to a soul," he whispered. "I was just talking to him. He is here on special business, and he wants nobody to know him."

"Then we'll be as mum as a mouse in a cheese," answered Sam.

"Correct," joined in Tom. "But what's his game?"

"I don't know," answered Dick. But he was destined to find out ere he was many days older.

CHAPTER VIII

FUN AT THE HOTEL

The long ride had made all of the boys hungry, and when they procured supper at the hotel they cleaned up nearly everything that was set before them.

"Nothing the matter with your appetites," observed a sour-looking individual who sat next to Tom at the table.

"Nothing at all, sir," answered the fun-loving youth. "What made you think there was?"

"Eh?"

"What made you think there was something wrong with our internal machinery, whereby we might be wanting in a proper regard for victuals?"

The man stared at Tom, and while a few at the table snickered, the man himself looked more sour than ever.

"See here, don't you poke fun at me!" he cried.

"Never dreamed of it, my dear sir," said Tom, unruffled. "By the way, how's your heart?"

"Why—er—my heart's all right."

"Glad to hear it. Yesterday I heard of a donkey who had his heart on the wrong side of his body. Odd case, wasn't it?"

"See here, you young imp, do you mean to call me a—er—a donkey?" and the man grew red in the face.

"A donkey? Why, no, sir! What put such a notion in your head?"

"You said—"

"So I did. Go on."

"You said—"

"So you said before."

"You said—"

"You said that before. You said, I said, and I said, so I did. It's perfectly clear, as the strainer said to the tea."

By this time, all sitting at the table were on a broad grin. As a matter of fact, the sour-looking man was not liked in that locality, and the boarders were glad to see somebody "take him down."

"I won't put up with your foolishness!" stormed the man. "I am not a donkey, and I want you to know it."

"Well, I am glad you mentioned it," said Tom calmly. "Now, there won't be the least occasion for a mistake."

"Don't insult me!"

"No, sir; I am not looking for work."

"Eh?"

"I said I wasn't looking for work."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That, sir, is a mystery puzzle, and there is a reward of one herring bone for the correct solution. Answers must be sent in on one side of the paper only, and have a certificate added that the sender has not got cold feet."

At this quaint humor, some at the table laughed outright. The sour-looking individual looked thoroughly enraged.

"I—I'll settle with you another time, young man!" he roared, and dashed from the room.

"Tom, you made it rather warm for him," remarked Dick.

"Well, he had no right to find fault with our appetites," grumbled Tom. "We are paying for our meals, and I am going to eat what I please."

"And I don't blame you, young man," said a gentleman sitting opposite. "Sladen is very disagreeable to us all and makes himself especially obnoxious to newcomers. He imagines the hotel is here for his especial benefit."

"Well, he wants to treat me fairly, or I'll give him as good as he sends, and better."

During the evening Sladen made himself particularly disagreeable to the Rovers and their chums. This set Tom to thinking, and he asked one of the hotel men what business the man was in and where he usually kept himself.

"He is a traveling salesman," was the answer. "He sells horse and cattle medicine."

"Oh, I see," said Tom, and set his brain to work to play some joke on the sour-looking vender of stock remedies.

Tom's chance came sooner than expected. A batch of colored folks had drifted into the place under the impression that a certain planter was going to give them work at big wages. They were a worthless lot, the scum of other plantations, and nobody wanted them.

Sitting down, Tom penned the following note and got it to one of the negroes in a roundabout fashion:

"The man who wants you and all of the others is Sandy Sladen. He does not dare to say so here at the hotel, but all of you had better go up to him on the sly and tell him you are ready to work, and ask for a dollar in advance—that's the sign that it is all right. Do not let him put you off, as he may want to test you. This is the chance of your life."

The communication was signed with a scrawl that might mean anything. The negro read it and passed it to his friends. All were

mystified, but they decided that they must do as the letter said, and without loss of time.

Sladen was sitting in the reading-room of the hotel smoking a cheap cigar, when he was told a negro wished to see him.

"Very well, send him in," he said in his loud, consequential tone.

The burly negro came in almost on tiptoes and, putting his mouth close to Sladen's ear, whispered:

"I'se ready to go to work, sah. Hadn't yo' bettah gib me a dollah, sah?"

"What's that?" demanded the traveling man.

The negro repeated his words in a slightly louder tone.

"I don't want you to work for me!" cried the sour-looking individual. "Get out!"

"Dat's all right, sah. I can do it, sah."

"I don't want you."

"Yes, yo' do, sah. Won't you han' ober dat dollah, sah? It will come in mighty useful, sah."

"Say, you're crazy!" cried the traveling man.

By this time two other colored men were coming in. Both approached as secretly as had the first.

"I'se ready to go to work fo' you, sah," said each, and added: "Kin I hab dat dollah?"

"Look here, what does this mean?" roared the irate man. "Get away from here, before I boot you out!"

But the negroes did not go, and in a few minutes more three others entered. Soon the reading-room was full of them, all talking in an excited manner.

"We'se ready to work fo' you!" they cried.

"Give me a chance fust?" bawled one big, coal-black fellow.

"No, de fust job comes to me!" put in the man who had received the letter.

"Dat job is mine!" called out a third. "Ain't dat so?" and he caught Sladen by the arm.

This was a signal for the others, and soon they completely surrounded the traveling man, who tried in vain to ward them off.

"Give us dat dollah!" called out several.

"We want work, an' yo' has got to gib it to us."

"Yo' can't bring us to dis town fo' nuffin!"

They pushed and hustled the traveling man all around the room, while the rest of the guests looked on in amazement. Tom and his friends stood by the door and enjoyed the scene immensely.

"He is surely getting all that is coming to him," observed Fred.

"Say, he vos so mad like a bumbles bee," came from Hans.

"If you don't go away, I'll call an officer!" came frantically from the traveling man. "I don't want to hire anybody."

"Yes, yo' do!" was the chorus. "Give us dat dollah!"

By this time the owner of the hotel had heard of the excitement, and he came bustling in.

"See here," he said to Sladen, "you can't use this hotel for an employment office. If you want to hire help, you have got to do it on the outside."

"I don't want help!" stormed the traveling man.

"These men say you sent for them."

"Maybe he wants them to try some of his horse remedies," suggested a man who did not like Sladen. "If so, I advise them not to take the job." And a general laugh arose at the sally.

"You have got to get out of here," said the hotel man, speaking to the negroes. "And you must go, too," he added to the traveling man.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You have made trouble enough around here. After this, when you come to town, you can go to some other hotel."

"This is an outrage!"

"We want a job, or some money!" bawled two of the colored men. And they rushed at Sladen and began to shake him violently. He pushed them away and started for the door. They went after him, and in the hallway he got into a free fight and almost had his coat torn from his back.

"I'll get even with somebody for this!" he almost foamed. "If I find out who played this joke on me—"

"Go on, and do your talking outside," interrupted the hotel proprietor, and then the disgruntled traveling man had to leave, with the angry mob of colored men following him. He was so pestered by the latter that he had to take a train out of town the very next morning.

"That was piling it on pretty thick, Tom," said Dick, after the excitement was over.

"He deserved it, Dick. I made some inquiries around the hotel, and not a single person liked him. He was the torment of all the hired help, and was keeping them in hot water continually."

"Well, if he finds you out, he'll make it warm for you."

"I intend to keep mum," answered the fun-loving Rover, and he did keep mum. It may be added here that he never met Sladen again.

CHAPTER IX

HANS AS A POET

Dick was down in the stable attached to the hotel on the following morning, when a man came in and approached him. He was the same individual who had drawn near when the eldest Rover was talking to the government detective.

"Getting ready to leave, stranger?" he said in a pleasant tone.

"Yes, we are going to start right after breakfast."

"Bound for the Denton plantation, so I hear?"

"Yes. Do you know Mr. Denton?"

"I met him once or twice—when he was in business in Braxbury. A nice man, so I understand."

"Yes, he is a very nice man."

"It might be that you are related to him?"

"No."

"That's a nice hoss you've been riding."

"I find him so," answered Dick shortly. He did not fancy the appearance of the man who was speaking to him.

"Looks something like a horse was here yesterday and the day before," continued the man, following Dick up. "I reckon you remember him?"

Dick did remember, for the horse had been ridden by James Monday.

"By the way, who was your friend?" added the man with assumed carelessness, but eying Dick closely.

"I can't tell you anything about him," was the sharp answer. "Have you a horse here?" continued Dick, to change the subject.

"Certainly. Then you didn't know the man?"

"Oh, I met him once or twice, years ago—when he was in business up in New York." And without waiting to be questioned further, Dick walked out of the stable. The man eyed him as closely as he had the government detective the day previous.

"He isn't much more than a boy, but I'd like to know if he is out here only for pleasure or on business," said the man to himself. "We can't be too careful in our work," and he smiled grimly.

"That fellow wants to know too much," said the eldest Rover in talking it over with his brother Sam. "I must say I don't like his looks at all."

"Nor I, Dick. I'll wager he has some game up his sleeve."

"Perhaps he is the fellow Mr. Monday is watching?"

"That is possible, too. He was certainly very inquisitive."

After a good breakfast, the Rovers and their friends prepared to resume their journey. From the landlord of the hotel they obtained information regarding the roads and trails to follow.

"They ain't none of the best," said the hotel man. "But they are the best we possess, so you'll have to put up with them," and he laughed at his little joke.

They were soon on the way. A good night's rest had put all in the best of humor, and they joked and sang as they rode along.

"Songbird, this ride ought to be full of inspirations for you," remarked Fred.

"I'll wager he is chockful of poetry at this minute," put in Dick.

"Then, for gracious' sake, turn on the spigot before you explode, Songbird," cried Tom. "Don't pen up your brilliant ideas when they want to flow."

"An idea just popped into my head," said the so-styled poet. "Now you have asked me, you have got to stand for it." And in a deep voice he commenced:

"The road is dusty, the road is long,
But we can cheer our way with song,
And as we ride with gladsome hearts—"

"Each one can wish he had some tarts," finished Tom, and continued:

"Or pies, or cakes, or ice-cream rare—
Good things that make a fellow stare!"

"Don't mention ice-cream!" cried Fred. "Oh, but wouldn't it be fine on such a hot day as this?"

"No ice-cream in this poetry," came from Songbird. "Listen!" and he went on:

"The road doth wind by forests deep,
Where soft the welcome shadows creep.
Down the valley, up the hill,
And then beside the rippling rill.
The welcome flowers line the way,
Throughout the livelong summer day,
The birds are flitting to and fro—"

"They love to flit and flit, you know," came from the irrepressible Tom, and he added:

"The bullfrog hops around the marsh,
His welcome note is rather harsh.

The lone mosquito shows his bill,
And, boring deep, secures his fill."

"Hold on, there!" came from Dick. "I draw the line on mosquitoes in poetry. They can do their own singing."

"And stinging," added Fred gayly.

"Mape I vos make some boultry vonce, ain't it?" said Hans calmly.

"That's it, Hans," cried Sam. "Go ahead, by all means." And the German youth started:

"Der sky vos green, der grass vos plue—
I sit town to an oyster stew;
Der pirds vos singing all der night—
You vill get choked of your collar is tight!
Oh, see der rooster scratching hay—
Ven der pand begins to blay!
At night der sun goes town to ped—
Und cofers mid clouds his old red head!
At night der moon she vinks at me—"

"—for making such bad poetree!" finished Tom, and added with a groan: "Hans, did you really make that all up by yourself?"

"Sure I did," was the proud answer.

"You must have had to eat an awful lot of mince pie to do it," put in Sam.

"Vot has mince bie to do mit boultry?"

"It's got a lot to do with such poetry as that," murmured Songbird in disgust.

"Oh, I know vots der madder. You vos jealous of me, hey?"

"Sure he is jealous, Hans," said Dick. "Songbird couldn't make up such poetry in a hundred years."

"It runs in der family," went on the German boy calmly. "Mine granfadder he vonce wrote a song. Da sung him py a funeral."

"Did it kill anybody?" asked Fred.

"Not much! It vos a brize song. He got a dollar for doing it."

"It must run in the family, like wooden legs among the soldiers," said Tom, and there the fun for the time being came to an end.

The road now ran up a hill, and then they came to a thick patch of timber. Before they left the timber, they rested for their mid-day lunch, camping out, as suited them.

"This is something like," remarked Fred. "I think it first-rate."

"It is very nice to be outdoors when it doesn't rain," answered Dick.

"How nice it would be if we had the girls along," said Sam.

"Oh, ho! Sam is pining for Grace!" cried Tom teasingly.

"Pooh! you needn't to blow," returned the youngest Rover, blushing. "Last night you called out for Nellie in your sleep. You must have been dreaming of her."

"I'll dream you!" burst out Tom, getting as red as Sam had been, and he made a move as if to throw a cup of coffee at his brother.

"Children! children!" said Dick sweetly. "I am—er—amazed."

"He's sorry because you forgot to mention Dora," said the irrepressible
Tom. "Now, Dora is just the cutest—"

"Avast, Tom, or you will get it," said Dick. "We haven't got the girls with us, so let us drop the subject."

It was very pleasant in the timber, and they did not leave until thoroughly rested. Near at hand was a small but pure stream, and here they washed up and watered their horses.

While the others were at the stream, Tom wandered off in the direction of the road. Now they saw him coming back full of excitement.

"Whom do you suppose I saw on the road?" he said.

"Give it up," returned Fred.

"Dan Baxter."

"Baxter!" came in a chorus.

"Yes. He was with that fellow who was at the hotel, the chap with the bushy hair," added Tom to Dick. "The man who asked so many questions."

"Were they on horseback?" asked Sam.

"Yes. When Baxter saw me, he looked frightened. I called to him to stop, but he wouldn't do it."

"Where were the pair going?" asked Dick with interest.

"In the same direction we are going."

"Perhaps we can catch up with them," went on Dick. "Anyway, it is worth trying."

A minute later all were in the saddle and on the trail once more.

CHAPTER X

A TWENTY-DOLLAR BILL

"It's odd that Dan Baxter should be out here," observed Sam as they journeyed along. "Can he be following us?"

"It is possible," returned Dick. "You know he would do almost anything to harm us."

"He has got to keep his distance," said Fred. "I shan't put up with any more of his games."

When they came to a turn of the road, they saw Dan Baxter and the bushy-haired man a long distance ahead. The former bully of Putnam Hall was on the lookout for them and at once urged his steed onward at an increased rate of speed.

"He means to get away if he possibly can," cried Songbird. "If we want to catch him, we have got to do our utmost."

On and on they rode, until another turn hid Baxter and his companion from view again.

The bully was frightened, for he did not know what would happen to him if he was caught by the Rovers and their friends in such a lonely spot as this.

The man who was with him, a fellow named Sack Todd, noticed his anxiety, and smiled grimly to himself.

"You're mighty anxious to git away from them fellows," he remarked.

"Well, if I am, what of it?" returned Dan Baxter sharply. So many things had gone wrong lately that he was thoroughly out of humor.

"Oh, I allow you have a perfect right to give 'em the go-by if you want to," answered Sack Todd. "I wouldn't mind helpin' you a bit—maybe. Tell me about 'em, will you?"

"They are fellows I hate, and I've always hated them!" cried the bully fiercely. "We used to go to the same boarding academy, and they did their best to get me into trouble. Then I tried to get square, and that put me in hot water and I had to leave. After that, we had more trouble. They tried to prove I was a criminal."

"I see. Go on."

"It's a long story. I hate 'em, and I'd do almost anything to get square with them."

"Good for you!" cried Sack Todd. "I like a fellow who wants to stand up for himself. But just now you are running away."

"I can't stand up against such a crowd alone. But some day it will be different."

"Let us turn down a side road," said Sack Todd. "That will throw 'em off the scent."

He was a good judge of character, and fancied he could read Baxter's story fairly well. The young man had come down in the world, and he was bitter against everybody and everything.

They passed down a side path and then on to a trail that was all but hidden by the grass and bushes.

"It's a short cut to Cottonton," said the man. "We can reach there in no time by this trail. Very few, though, know of the route."

As they rode along the half-hidden trail, he questioned Dan Baxter more closely than ever, and as a result learned as much as he cared to know. He realized that the former bully was hard up and ready to do almost anything to make some money. What he had possessed, he had spent in gambling and other forms of fast living.

"Perhaps I can put you in the way of making some money," said Sack Todd slowly. "That is, if you are not over particular as to what it is," he added, looking at Baxter sharply.

"I'm not looking for hard work, thank you," was the ready answer. "I am not used to that sort of thing, and couldn't stand it."

"This sort of work would be easy enough. But it would require judgment—and a little nerve at first."

"Well, I think I have fairly good judgment, and, as for nerve—why, try me, that's all."

"Then there is another point to the business. You'd have to drive some pretty sharp bargains."

"I can do that."

"Sometimes the goods are not exactly as represented—"

"I guess I understand, and that wouldn't stop me," and Dan Baxter grinned. "But I'd want pretty good pay."

"I think I can make that suitable—after we know each other better," said Sack Todd.

He continued to draw Baxter out, and hinted at a scheme to make big money. At last, the former bully of Putnam Hall could stand it no longer.

"See here," he cried. "If you mean business, spit out what is in your mind. You can trust me with anything. I am not of the milk-and-water sort. I am out for money, first, last and all the time."

"Then you are a fellow after my own heart," answered the man. "I reckon we can come to terms. But not just yet."

"Well, I've got to have something pretty quick. I am next to dead-broke."

"Perhaps I can help you out a bit."

"I wish you would."

"Here is twenty dollars. I reckon that will prove that I am taking an interest in you." And the bright, crisp bill was handed over.

"Money talks!" cried Dan Baxter. He gazed at the bank note in genuine pleasure. "I am much obliged."

"Here is where I must leave you," went on Sack Todd as they reached a crossing in the trails. "Keep right on, and you'll soon come in sight of Cottonton. Meet me there to-night at the Planters' Rest."

"I will."

"You had better keep out of sight—if those Rovers are on your trail."

"Trust me to lay low," said Baxter with a short laugh.

In another moment the former bully of Putnam Hall found himself alone.
Sack Todd had galloped off at a high rate of speed.

"He is certainly an odd sort," mused Baxter. "But I guess he means to do right by me, or he wouldn't lend me a twenty so readily. He must be used to handling big money, by the roll of bills he carried. I wish I possessed such a roll. There must have been several hundred dollars in it, at least."

He felt to make sure that the bill was safe in his pocket, and then continued on his journey. Several times he looked back, but he could see nothing of the Rover boys or their friends.

Dan Baxter felt particularly downcast and desperate. Since the capture of Lew Flapp, he had been without a companion in whom to confide, and the peculiar loneliness among utter strangers was beginning to tell on him. This was one reason why he had told Sack Todd so much of his story.

Coming to the end of the timber and brush-wood, he saw, lying before him in something of a valley, the town of Cottonton, consisting of

several well laid out streets and an outlying district of pretty homes. At a distance was the regular road, but so far his enemies were not in sight.

The ride had made Baxter hungry and, reaching the town, he lost no time in hunting up a modest restaurant on a side street, where, he hoped, the Rovers would not find him.

"What can you give me for dinner?" he asked. "I want something good."

A number of dishes were named over, and he selected roast beef, potatoes, beans, coffee and pie. He was quickly served, and pitched in with a will.

"Riding makes a fellow feel hungry," he explained to the proprietor of the eating house, who hovered near.

"Yes, sah, so it does. Going to stay in town, sah?"

"I don't know yet. I'm just looking around."

"Yes, sah, certainly. If you stay, I'll be pleased to furnish meals regularly, sah."

"I'll remember that."

Having disposed of the meal and also an extra cup of coffee, Dan Baxter called for a cigar and lit it. Then he hauled out the twenty-dollar bill. As he did so, he gave a slight start. He had handled a good deal of money in his time, and the bank bill looked just a bit peculiar to him.

"What if it isn't good?" he asked himself.

"Forty-five cents, please," said the restaurant keeper. His usual price for such a meal was thirty cents, but he thought Baxter could stand the raise.

"Sorry I haven't a smaller bill," answered the bully coolly. "I ought to have asked the bank cashier to give me smaller bills."

"I reckon I can change it, sah," said the restaurant man, thinking only of the extra fifteen cents he was to receive.

"Take out half a dollar and have a cigar on me," continued Baxter magnanimously.

"Yes, sah; thank you, sah!" said the man.

He fumbled around, and in a minute counted out nineteen dollars and a half in change. Pocketing the amount, the bully walked out, mounted his horse once more and rode away.

"Nice chap, to pay forty-five cents and then treat me to a cigar," thought the restaurant keeper. "Wish I had that sort coming in every day."

He lit the cigar and smoked it with a relish, particularly so as it had not cost him anything. He put the twenty-dollar bill away, to use when he should go to a neighboring city to buy some household goods, two days later.

When he went to buy his things, they came to twenty-six dollars, and he passed over the new twenty-dollar bill, and also an old one received some weeks before.

"I'll have to get change at the bank," said the store keeper, and left his place to do so. In a few minutes he came back in a hurry.

"See here," he cried. "They tell me one of these bills is a counterfeit."

"A counterfeit!" gasped the restaurant man.

"So the bank cashier says."

"Which bill?"

"The new one."

"You don't mean it! Why, I took that bill in only a couple of days ago."

"Then you got stuck, Mr. Golden."

"Is he sure it's a counterfeit?"

"Dead certain of it. He says it's rather a clever imitation, and that a number of them are afloat around these parts. Where did you get it?"

"A stranger gave it to me," groaned the restaurant keeper. "I thought he was mighty smooth. He treated me to a cigar! I wish I had him here!"

"You had better watch out for him."

"Sure I will. But I suppose he'll know enough to keep out of my way," added the man who had been victimized.

CHAPTER XI

A MIDNIGHT SCARE

The Rovers reached Cottonton without catching sight of Dan Baxter again, nor did they locate him while stopping at the town.

"He knows enough to keep out of our way," remarked Dick. "Even now he may be watching every move we make."

They did not remain in Cottonton long, and that night found them once more on a trail leading to another patch of timber. All were in excellent spirits, and Hans enlivened the time by singing a song in his broken English in a manner which convulsed them all.

"Hans would make his fortune on the variety stage," remarked Fred. "His manner is too funny for anything."

"Vot you said apout a stage?" demanded the German youth. "I ton't vos ride on no stage ven I got a goot horse alretty."

"Fred wants you to go on the stage," said Sam,

"He thinks you might play Shakespeare," said Tom.

"Vot kind of a play is dot Shakespeares?"

"It's a farce in 'steen acts and twice as many scenes," said Dick. "You might play the double-tongued mute."

"I like not such a blay. I like dot blay vere da vos all killed off kvick."

"Good gracious! Hans wants to go in for tragedy!" ejaculated Tom. "Who would think he was so bloodthirsty. If you keep on like that, Hansy, dear, I'll be afraid you'll murder us in our sleep."

"I like dem murders. Da vos alvays make dem goose skins mine back town."

At this there was a general roar.

"'Goose skins' is good," came from Fred.

"Vot you laffin' at, hey?" demanded Hans.

"Nothing."

"Dere don't been noddings to laugh at by a murder, not so?"

"That's true, Hansy," said Sam.

"Maybe of you vos killed, you vould sit ub and laugh at him, hey?"

"I shouldn't laugh," said Tom. "I'd keep quiet about it."

"Yah, I know you, Tom Rofer. I bet you sixteen cents I vos a better actor mans as you been," continued Hans, warming up.

"I don't doubt it, Hansy. Some day we'll put you on the stage."

"Of I got on der stage, I make me a hundred dollars a veek, I pet you my head!"

"Maybe you'd make two hundred, Hans," suggested Songbird.

"You all peen jealous of vot I can do. But some day I vos show you, you see!" cried the German youth, and rode on ahead, somewhat out of sorts.

They had resolved to camp out that night in true hunter fashion, and approaching a spot that looked inviting, they came to a halt. The place was some distance from the road and ideal in many respects, being on high ground and with a spring of pure water flowing into a tiny brook but fifty feet away.

As they had no tent, they proceeded to make a shelter of boughs, and covered the flooring with the same material. In the meantime, a campfire

was lit, and two of the number set about preparing the supper which had been brought along.

"This is all very well, when one has his stuff with him," observed Fred. "But if we had to go out and shoot game or catch fish, it would be a different story."

"Pooh, as if we haven't done that!" cried Tom. "I shouldn't like anything better than to go out into the woods for a month."

By the time the shelter was in readiness for the night, the supper was cooked, and all sat around the campfire to partake of the meal. A certain part of it had been slightly burnt, but to this nobody paid attention, although it would have been noticed if this had occurred at home or at a hotel. But camping out makes such a difference, doesn't it, boys?

"Supposing some wild animals came along to eat us up?" said Sam when they were finishing their meal.

"Are there any wild animals around here?" questioned Songbird.

"I am sure I don't know. There may be bobcats in the timber."

"Vot is a popcat?" asked Hans.

"It's a kind of a wildcat—very strong and very fierce."

"Of dot peen der case, I ton't vonts to meet Mr. Popcat."

"I don't think any of us want to meet such a beast," said Tom. "Is anybody to stay on guard to-night?"

"Don't ask me—I'm too dead tired," said Dick promptly.

"Nor me!" came from the others.

"Let us go to sleep and venture it," said Sam. "I don't think a thing will come near us."

So it was decided, and as soon as the campfire began to die down, one after another of the boys retired. Songbird was the last to lie down, and soon he was slumbering as peacefully as the rest.

Sam had been sleeping perhaps three hours, when he woke up with a slight start. He sat up and tried to pierce the darkness around him.

"Did anybody call?" he questioned after a pause.

Nobody answered, and he listened attentively. The horses had been tethered in the bushes close to the shelter, and now he heard several of the animals move around uneasily.

"Something must be disturbing them," he told himself. "I'll have to get up and see what it is."

At first, he thought he would arouse some of the others, but all appeared to be sleeping so soundly he hated to do so.

"They won't thank me for waking them up, unless it is worth while," was what he told himself.

He arose and felt his way over the others who lay between himself and the opening of the shelter. Outside, there was no moon, but the stars were shining brightly, and he could make out objects that were not too far off.

As he moved toward the horses, he heard a rustling in the bushes. He strained his eyes and made out a dark form stealing along close to the ground.

"A wild beast!" he muttered. "I wish I had a gun."

He turned back to the shelter and aroused Dick, and then Tom. This awoke all of the others.

"What's the matter?" questioned Dick, as he got out a pistol.

"Some sort of a wild animal is prowling around this place."

"Py chiminy! Vos it von of dem catpobs?" ejaculated Hans, turning pale.

"I don't know what it is."

"Where is it now?" came from Fred.

"I don't know that, either. It was slinking around yonder bushes a minute ago."

"Let us stir up the fire," put in Songbird. "All wild animals hate a big blaze." And he set the example, and Hans helped to heap up the brushwood.

"I ton't vont to become acquainted mit dem catpobs nohow," said the German youth. "He can go avay so kvick like he come."

After the fire was brightened, there came a painful pause. Each boy was on his guard, with eyes straining from their sockets.

"I see something!" cried Fred suddenly.

"Where?" asked the others in a breath.

"There—but it's gone now."

Again they waited, and soon came a rustling on the other side of the camp, followed by the cracking of a bone which had been thrown away during the evening repast.

"There he is!"

"Shoot him!"

"No, don't shoot!" burst out Tom. "I know what it is."

"What?"

"Nothing but a dog."

"Nonsense."

"I say it is." Tom began to whistle. "Come here, old boy," he went on. "Good dog, come here."

At this, the animal stopped crunching the bone and came forward slowly and suspiciously. It was indeed a large, black dog, with curly hair and lean sides.

"Hullo!" cried Sam. "Come here, that's a good dog. Say, fellows, he looks half starved."

"Are you sure it ain't no catpob?" queried Hans anxiously.

"Yes, Hans," answered Songbird. "He is nothing but a dog, and rather friendly at that."

The dog came closer, wagging his tail slowly and suspiciously. Dick put out his hand and patted him, and then he waved his tail in a vigorous fashion.

"He is willing enough to be friends," said the eldest Rover. "I shouldn't be surprised if he is homeless."

"In that case, we might adopt him," said Tom, who loved a nice dog.

"Let us try him on something to eat," put in Songbird. "There is no meat left on that bone."

Some things had been saved for breakfast, and a portion was set before the newcomer. He devoured it greedily and wagged his tail furiously.

"He feels at home now," said Dick, and he was right. The dog leaped up, first on one and then another, and licked their hands.

"What's your name?" asked Tom, and the dog wagged his tail and gave a low, joyful bark.

"Better call him Wags," suggested Sam. "He seems to be death on keeping that tail going."

"Wags it is," announced Tom. "How do you like it, Wags, old boy?" And the dog barked again and leaped up and down several times in joy.

"Vell, he vos goot enough," was Hans' comment. "Bud I ton't see vy he couldn't introduce himselluf by der daydime alretty. I vos going to ped again," and he rubbed his eyes sleepily.

"So am I going to bed," said Fred. "Tom, are you going to stay awake to watch the dog?"

"No, he is going to sleep with me," answered the fun-loving youth. "Come on, Wags, get your nightcap and come to bed."

He made a certain move of his hand and the canine suddenly sat upon his haunches and cocked his head to one side.

"Hullo, he's a trick dog!" exclaimed Dick. "Shake hands," and the dog did so. Then, as Sam snapped his fingers, the animal began to walk around the camp on his hind legs.

"I'll wager he knows a lot of tricks," said Tom. "And, if so, he must be valuable."

"Then whoever owns him will want him back," was Songbird's comment.

"Well, I guess he can travel with us until somebody claims him," said Tom; and so it was decided.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUNAWAY STEER

On the following morning there was the promise of a storm in the air, and the boys felt a bit blue over the prospects. But, by nine o'clock, the sun came out as brightly as ever and they were correspondingly elated.

"I don't care to do any camping out in wet weather," said Fred. "I got enough of that at the Hall."

"Well, when you camp out, you must take what comes, as the shark said when he swallowed a naval officer and found a sword sticking in his throat," answered Tom. "We can't have the weather built to order for anybody."

Wags was up and moving around, with his tail wagging as furiously as ever. He seemed to feel perfectly at home.

"Acts as if he had known us all our lives," said Dick. "He is certainly a fine creature, or he will be after he is fed up a bit."

"If he belongs around here, I don't see how he should be starved," said Sam.

"Well, you must remember, there are some pretty poor folks living in these parts, Sam. The colored folks are passionately fond of dogs, and very often they don't have enough to support themselves."

"I am going to claim Wags as my own until his rightful owner comes along," announced Tom. "Maybe I'll even take him home with me. Our old dog is dead."

This was final, and nobody saw fit to dispute the decision. So Wags was given his breakfast, after which the party struck camp, and the journey for the Denton plantation was continued.

The timber passed, they came out on a long stretch of prairie land leading to the high hills beyond.

"Here we are on the plains!" cried Sam. "Who wants to race?" And off he rode at top speed, with some of the others following. Even Wags seemed to enjoy the brush, and barked continually as he ran ahead and leaped up before one horse and then another.

Sam's wild ride on the plains lasted rather longer than the others had anticipated, and when it came to an end, all found themselves away from the beaten trail which they had been pursuing. They came to a sudden stop and gazed around in perplexity.

"Here's a mess," said Dick.

"Where's the trail?"

"That is what I want to know."

"I think it is over yonder."

"I think it is in the opposite direction."

All of the boys began to talk at once, and then followed a dead silence for several seconds.

"One thing is certain—the trail can't be in two directions," said Tom.

"He can pe if he vos krooked," said Hans wisely.

"It was a fairly straight trail," observed Fred. "I can't see how we happened to leave it."

"I was following Sam," said Songbird. "You can't blame me."

"So was I following Sam," added several of the others.

"And I was having a good time on the horse," said the youngest Rover. "I thought in the bunch there would be at least one who would look after the trail."

"So it is really nobody's fault," said Dick quickly, to avoid a possible quarrel. "The question is: how are we going to find the trail again?"

"I know how," put in Hans calmly.

"How?"

"Look for him."

"Thanks, awfully," said Tom. "That is a bright as a burnt-out match."

"Just the same, that is what we will have to do, Tom," said Dick. "Let us divide up, and some go to the right and some to the left."

This was considered a good plan and was carried out without delay. Ten minutes later, Songbird set up a shout:

"Upon this ground,
The trail is found.
All come right here
And see it clear."

"Good for Songbird!" cried Tom. "He gets a last year's tomato as a reward. Songbird, will you have it in tissue paper or a trunk?"

"Well, the trail is plain enough," was Dick's comment, as he came riding up. "I can't see how we missed such a well-defined path."

The run had tired their horses somewhat, and all were willing to proceed further on a walk. They were coming to a fringe of bushes on the plain, and here found a stream of water.

"Not a ranch or a plantation of any kind in sight," announced Fred as he gazed around while some of the steeds obtained a drink. "What a wilderness certain portions of our country are!"

"Plenty of chances for emigrants," returned Songbird. "We are a long way from being filled up."

"The trouble is, so I have heard father say, so many of the emigrants stay in the big cities, rather than come out to the country," put in Sam.

Having rested for a spell at the brook, they proceeded on their way once more. The air was growing warmer and, as the sun mounted higher in the sky, they wished they were in the shadow of a forest once more.

"What a journey it must be to cover some of the immense Western plains on horseback," remarked Songbird. "To ride for miles and miles—maybe all day—without seeing a cabin or a human being."

"We know something of that," answered Dick. "We liked our trip out West, though," he added.

Toward the middle of the afternoon they reached the first stunted growth of timber growing at the base of the hills toward which they had been journeying. At noon, as it was so hot, they had not stopped for lunch, and now they proceeded to make themselves comfortable on a patch of thick grass. Even Wags was willing to lie down and stretch out. The dog acted as if he had been a member of the party since starting from home.

"Are you going to blame me for going wrong?" demanded the poetic youth.

"I wonder if he would be any good after game?" said Sam as he looked at Wags.

"I doubt it," said Tom. "An educated dog—that is, a trick dog—rarely knows anything else. But, nevertheless, I think Wags remarkably bright."

It was not until four o'clock that they went on once more. According to what they had been told, they ought now to be coming in sight of a cattle ranch kept by some old cattle men, but nothing like a ranch appeared.

"This is queer, to say the least," remarked Tom as they came to a halt in a small clearing. "What do you make of it, Dick?"

"I shouldn't like to say, just yet."

"Do you think we are on the wrong trail?" queried Fred quickly.

"We may be."

"Of dot is so, den, py Jiminatics, ve vos lost!" ejaculated Hans. "Now, vosn't dot lofly alretty?"

"Lost?" cried Fred.

"That's the size of it," cried Songbird. "We must have taken to the wrong trail after our little race."

"You found the trail for us," remarked Tom dryly.

"Not a bit of it," said Dick. "All of us were to blame, for we all thought it was the right trail. The one question is: where are we, and where is the right trail?"

"And a big question to answer, Dick," came from Sam. "For all we know, we may be miles and miles off the road."

"No use of crying over spilt oil, as the lamp said to the wick," sang out Tom. "I move we go on until we strike a ranch, or plantation, or something."

"That is what we'll have to do, unless we want to go back."

"No going back in this!" shouted several, and then they moved forward as before, but at a slower rate of speed.

It was truly warm work, and it must be confessed that all were more or less worried. In the last town at which they had stopped, they had met a number of undesirable characters, and one man had told Dick that not a few outlaws were roaming around, ready to pick up stray horses, or money, or whatever they could get their hands upon.

They were passing through a bit of sparse timber, when they heard a strange tramping at a distance.

"What do you think that can be?" questioned Fred, coming to a halt, followed by the others.

"Horses," suggested Hans.

"Sounds to me like cattle," said Dick. "But I don't see so much as a cow, do you?"

"Nothing whatever in sight," said Tom.

As the noise continued, Sam's horse began to grow skittish and showed some inclination to bolt.

"Steady, there!" sang out the youngest Rover. "None of that, now!" and he did his best to hold the steed in check.

"Something is coming!" cried Tom a few seconds later. "Something running pretty well, too!"

By instinct, all turned to the side of the trail, Sam taking a position between a clump of trees and a big rock. Swiftly the sound came closer, and then of a sudden a big and wild-looking steer broke into view, lumbering along the trail at his best speed.

"A steer!"

"Look out, fellows, he is wild and ugly!"

"He looks as if he meant to horn somebody!"

So the cries rang out, and all of the boys drew further to the side of the trail. As the steer came up, he paused and gazed at them in commingled wonder and anger.

"He is going to charge—" began Tom, when, with a fierce snort, the steer wheeled to one side and charged upon Sam and his horse at full speed!

CHAPTER XIII

JIM JONES, THE COWBOY

To some of the boys it looked as if Sam and his steed must surely be seriously injured, if not killed. The steer was large and powerful looking, and his horns were sharp enough to inflict serious damage.

"Back up, Sam!" screamed Tom.

Poor Sam could not back very well, and now his horse was thoroughly unmanageable. Closer came the steer, until his wicked looking horns were but a foot away.

At that critical moment a shot rang out, so close at hand that it made all of the boys jump. Realizing the dire peril, Dick had drawn the pistol he carried and fired at the steer. His aim was fair, and the beast was struck in the ribs.

"Good for you, Dick!" burst out poor Sam. "Give him another," he added, as he tried to quiet his horse and keep the steed from pitching him to the ground.

Dick was quite willing to take another shot, but to get into range was not so easy. Songbird's horse was between himself and the steer, and the latter was plunging around in a manner that was dangerous for the entire party.

But at last the eldest Rover saw his opportunity, and once more the pistol rang out on the summer air. The shot took the steer in the left ear and he gave a loud snort of pain and staggered as if about to fall.

"He is about done for!" cried Tom. "I am glad of it."

The steer continued to plunge around for fully two minutes and all took good care to keep out of his reach. Then he took a final plunge and fell over on his side, breathing heavily and rolling his eyes the while.

"I reckon I had better give him a final shot," was Dick's comment, and, dismounting, he came forward and fired directly into the beast's eye. It was a finishing move, and, with a convulsive shudder, the steer lay still, and the unexpected encounter came to an end.

"Well, I am glad that is over," said Sam as he wiped the cold perspiration from his forehead. "I thought he was going to horn me, sure!"

"He would have done so, had it not been for Dick," returned Tom.

"I know it. Dick, I shan't forget this."

"What's to be done about the steer?" asked Songbird. "It seems a pity to leave him here."

"Vot is der madder mit cutting him ub for meats?" put in Hans. "Ve can haf some nice steak ven ve go into camp next dime, hey?"

"That's a scheme," said Fred.

At that moment, Wags, who had kept in the background so long as the steer was raging around, set up a sharp barking.

"What's wrong now?" asked Tom, turning to the dog.

"Somebody may be coming," suggested Dick.

"I'll show you fellers wot's wrong!" cried a rough voice, and through the brushwood close by there crashed a broncho, on top of which rode a rough-looking cowboy, wearing a red shirt and a big slouch hat. "Who went and shot that steer?"

"I did," answered Dick. "Was he yours?"

"He was, and you had no right to touch him," growled the cowboy.

"Didn't I, though?" said Dick. "Are you aware that he came close to hurting us? He charged full tilt at my brother's horse."

"Stuff and fairy tales, boy. That steer was all right. He broke away from the drove, but he wouldn't hurt a flea."

"We know better," put in Tom.

"If my brother hadn't killed him, he would probably have killed my horse, and maybe me," added Sam.

"Somebody has got to pay for the damage done," growled the cowboy. "I am not going to stand for it, not me, so sure as my name is Jim Jones." And he shook his head determinedly.

"Well, Mr. Jones, I am sorry I had to kill your steer, but it had to be done, and that is all there is to it," said Dick calmly.

"That ain't payin' for the critter, is it?"

"No."

"An' do you reckon I'm goin' to let the boss take the price out o' my wages?" continued Jim Jones warmly.

"Isn't the steer worth something as meat?"

"Yes, but not near as much as he was wuth on the hoof."

"We might take up a collection for Mr. Jones, if he is a poor man," suggested Songbird, who did not want any trouble.

"But we haven't got to do it," broke in Tom. "It was his business not to let the steer run wild in the first place."

"So you're going to take a hand, eh?" stormed the cowboy; then, feeling he was in the minority, he went on more humbly: "Yes, I'm a poor man, and this may get me discharged."

"How much do you think we ought to pay?" asked Dick. "Name a reasonable price and I may settle, just to avoid trouble, and not because I think I ought to pay."

"How about fifty dollars?" asked the cowboy with a shrewd look in his fishy, blue eyes.

"Cut it in half, and I may meet you," came from Dick. "He was no blue-ribbon animal."

The cowboy tried to argue, but the Rovers and their chums would not listen, and in the end Jim Jones said he would accept twenty-five dollars and let it go at that. He said he would have the steer carted away before night.

"Where do you come from?" asked Dick after paying over the money.

"From the Cassibel ranch, sixty miles north-west from here. I and my pard were driving some cattle to town, when this steer got scared at a rattlesnake and broke away."

"I don't blame him," said Fred. "I'd get scared at a rattlesnake, myself."

"Do you know the way to Mr. Carson Denton's plantation?" went on Dick.

"Sure."

"This is not the right trail, is it?"

"Not by a long shot. The right trail is four miles from here."

"Will you direct us to the right road?" asked Dick.

"Sure thing," answered Jim Jones. He paused for a moment. "Want to get there the easiest way possible, I reckon?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, keep to this trail for half a mile further. Then, when you come to the blasted hemlock, take the trail to the left. That will take you through the upper end of the next town and right on to Denton's."

"Thanks," said Dick. "Is it a good road?"

"Fine, after the fust few miles are passed. There are a few bad spots at first, but you mustn't mind them."

"We shan't mind," came from Sam. "We have struck some bad spots already."

A few additional words passed, and then all of the boys rode along the trail as the cowboy had pointed out. Jim Jones, standing beside the dead steer, watched them out of sight and chuckled loudly to himself.

"Reckon I squared accounts with 'em," he muttered. "Got twenty-five dollars in cash and the animile, and if they foller thet trail as I told 'em—well, there ain't no tellin' where they'll fotch up. But it won't be Denton's ranch, not by a long shot!" and he laughed heartily to himself.

All unconscious that they had been wrongly directed by Jim Jones, the Rover boys and their chums continued their journey. When they reached the hemlock that had been struck by lightning, they took to the other path as directed.

"I am sorry I didn't ask how far that town was," said Dick. "For all we know, we may be miles away from it."

"If it gets too late, we had better go into camp for the night," suggested Songbird, and so it was agreed.

The coming of night found them in something of a hollow between two ranges of hills. The trail was soft and spongy, and the horses frequently sank in over their hoofs.

"This is something I didn't bargain for," observed Songbird. "I trust we don't get stuck and have to go back."

"That cowboy said the trail would be poor for a while," came from Fred.

They continued to go forward, on the lookout for some suitable spot where they might camp for the night. The thought of reaching a town had faded away an hour before.

"Gosh! this is getting worse!" cried Tom. "Be careful, Hans!" he called to the German youth, who was ahead.

"Vot's dot?" sang out the other.

"I said, be careful. You don't want to sink through to China, do you?"

"Not much I ton't," was the answer. "Oh!"

Hans let out a loud cry of alarm, and with good reason. His horse had struck a sink-hole, as they are called on the plains, and gone down to his knees. He made such a plunge that poor Hans was thrown over his head, to land full length in an oozy, sticky bog.

"Stop!" cried Dick, as soon as he saw this accident. "Don't go any further, fellows, it's dangerous!"

"Hellup! safe me!" roared Hans, trying in vain to extricate himself from the oozy bog, while his horse did the same. "Hellup, oder I peen drowned in der mud alretty!"

CHAPTER XIV

OUT OF AN UNPLEASANT SITUATION

Not one of the party was just then in a position to give poor Hans any assistance. All were stuck in the ooze, and one horse after another was slowly but surely sinking.

"We must turn back," cried Songbird, "and do it in a hurry, too."

"Easier said than done," grunted Fred. "My, this is worse than glue!"

"I think the ground on our left is a bit firmer than here," said Sam. "I am going to try it, anyway."

Not without considerable difficulty, he turned his steed, and after a struggle the spot he had indicated was gained. Dick followed, and so did Tom.

The Rovers were safe, but not so their chums. Hans was the worst off, but Fred and Songbird were likewise in positions of serious peril. Wags was flying around, barking dismally, as though he understood that all was not right.

"Turn this way!" called out Sam. "It's your one hope!"

"Let me have that rope you are carrying, Tom," said Dick, and having received the article, he threw one end to Hans, who was still floundering around. "Catch hold, Hans, and I'll haul you over!"

As the rope fell across the German youth's body, he caught it tightly in both hands, and, as Dick, Tom and Sam pulled with might and main, he fairly slid on his breast to where they were standing.

"Mine gracious, dot vos somedings awful!" he exclaimed. "It vos so sticky like molasses alretty!"

"Now, we must help the others," said Dick.

"Songbird is out," exclaimed Sam.

The rope was thrown to Fred, and with a great tug he was finally brought out of the ooze.

"Nearly took my hand off," he declared. "But I don't care—anything is better than to be stuck in such a spot as that."

The horses were still floundering desperately, and it was little that they could do for the beasts. One went in one direction and the others in another, but at last all appeared to be safe, although covered with the sticky mud and slime.

"That's an adventure I didn't bargain for," was Tom's comment. "Do you know what I think? I think that cowboy sent us into this on purpose."

"Maybe he did," came from Dick. "Did it, I suppose, to get square because we didn't pay him all he thought the steer was worth."

To round up the horses was no easy task, and by the time this was accomplished it was long past dark. They searched around for a suitable spot and then went into camp.

"This trip is lasting longer than I expected," remarked Dick when they were around the camp-fire preparing an evening meal. "I trust the others don't get worried about us."

"Oh, I guess they know that we can take care of ourselves," answered Tom.

"I wish I had that cowboy here," muttered Sam. "I'd give him a piece of my mind."

"I think we'd all do that," added Fred.

"I vos gif him a biece of mine mind from der end of mine fist," said Hans, and this made them all laugh.

The camping spot was not a particularly good one, yet all slept soundly. They left Wags on guard, but nothing came to disturb them.

It was misty in the morning and so raw that they shivered as they prepared to start off. How to proceed was a question, and it took them a good quarter of an hour to decide it.

"It would be folly to go deeper into this bog, or swamp," said Dick. "I vote we keep to the high ground."

"That's the talk," said Sam. "Maybe, when we get up far enough, we will have a chance to look around us."

As well as they were able, they had cleaned off the horses and themselves, and now they took good care to keep from all ground that looked in the least bit treacherous.

"Here is a new trail," cried Tom after about two miles had been covered. "And it seems to lead up a hill, too."

"Then that is the trail for us," put in Songbird, and they took to the new trail without further words.

"Songbird, I don't hear any poetry," observed Dick as they rode along. "What's the matter?"

"Can't make up poetry in such a dismal place as this," was the answer in a disgusted voice. "I wish we were out of this woods, and out of the mist, too. I declare, it's enough to give a fellow malaria."

The sun was trying to break through the mist, which was an encouraging sign. Here and there a bird set up a piping note, but otherwise all was as quiet as a tomb.

"I see something of a clearing ahead," announced Sam presently.

"And a trail!" cried Fred. "Thank fortune for that!"

The clearing reached, they found a well-defined trail running to the southwestward.

"That must run to Caville," announced Dick. "See, there is a regular wagon track."

"I hope it is the right road," returned Fred.

They were soon out on the plains again, and then into another patch of timber. They had to ford a small stream, and on the other side came to a fork in the trail.

"Which way now?" questioned Sam, as all came to a halt in perplexity.

"This seems to be the main road, although it is hard to tell one from the other," said Dick after an examination.

The others agreed with the eldest Rover, and once more they went forward. But, in less than a mile, they saw that the road was not in as good a condition as that left behind.

"This looks as if we had made a mistake," observed Fred. "Oh, what luck we are having!"

"I'd like to know—" began Tom, when he stopped abruptly, for out of the brushwood an old man had stepped, gun in hand.

"You-uns, hold on!" cried the old man.

"Hullo, what do you want?" asked Dick.

"I want for you-uns to turn around an' go tudder way."

"Isn't this the trail to Caville?"

"No, it ain't, an' you-uns can't come this way, nohow."

"Is it a private road?"

"Yes."

"Where does it lead to?"

"That ain't none o' you-uns' business," said the old man curtly. "You-uns is on the wrong road, an' have got to turn back."

"Supposing we don't turn back?" questioned Tom, who did not fancy the style in which they were being addressed.

At this, the old man tapped his gun.

"Orders is to turn 'em back, or shoot," he answered simply. "This are a private road. Don't ye see the wire fence?"

They looked into the brushwood and saw a single strand of wire stretched from tree to tree on each side of the trail.

"Not much of a fence," was Songbird's comment.

"It's enough, an' you-uns can't come no further."

"Maybe you live beyond," said Sam curiously.

"Maybe I do, an' maybe I don't. It ain't none of you-uns' business."

"You are very civil, I must say."

"Don't you git fly, boy, or this ole gun o' mine might go off. This ain't no trail fer you-uns, an' you-uns have got to turn back."

"Will you tell us if that other trail runs to Caville?" asked Dick.

"It don't run nowheres." The old man grinned for a moment. "It stays where it are. But if you-uns travel along it for about five miles, ye'll reach the town."

"And you won't tell us whose road this is?" came from Tom.

"It ain't none of you-uns' business, thet ain't. Better turn back an' have done with it."

The old man showed plainly that he did not wish to converse further. He stood in the center of the trail, with his gun ready for instant use.

"We made a mistake before and got into a sink-hole," said Dick. "We don't want to make another mistake."

"Take tudder trail an' you-uns will be all right," answered the old man, and thereupon they turned around and rode off.

"What a crusty old fellow!" said Sam.

"Yes, but he meant business," came from Fred. "He would have shot at us sure, had we insisted upon moving forward."

"There is some mystery about this," said Dick.

"Perhaps he lives a hermit life down that trail," suggested Songbird.

"It looked more to me as if he was on guard," put in Sam. "He certainly meant business."

"If we had time, I'd sneak around to one side and see what was beyond."

"Yes, and get shot," said Fred. "We had better take his advice and go on to Caville."

It did not take them long to reach the fork in the road, and here they turned into the other trail. They had proceeded less than fifty yards, when Dick put up his hand.

"Somebody is coming behind us," he announced.

They halted at a turn in the road and looked back. Two persons soon appeared, both on horse-back. They were riding at a good gait and turned into the trail which was guarded by the old man.

"Well, I never!" cried Tom in amazement.

"I recognized the first man," said Sam. "It was that bushy-haired fellow. I think somebody said his name was Sack Todd."

"That's the chap," replied Dick. "But didn't you recognize the other?"

"No."

"It was Dan Baxter."

CHAPTER XV

SOMETHING OF A MYSTERY

"Dan Baxter!"

The cry came simultaneously from several of the crowd.

"I think Dick is right," said Songbird. "I thought it must be Dan, but I wasn't sure, for I didn't expect to see him here."

"He and that Sack Todd must have become friends," put in Tom. "I would like to know what Dan is doing out here."

"He is certainly up to no good," answered Dick. "I must say this adds to the mystery, doesn't it, boys?"

"That's what it does," chimed in Sam. "I wish we could catch Baxter and bring him to justice."

"Or reform him," came from Dick.

"Reform him, Dick!" cried Tom. "That would be mighty uphill work."

"It isn't in him," added Fred. "He is tee-totally bad."

"I used to think that of Dan's father, but Arnold Baxter has reformed—and he wants his son to do likewise."

"Well, that isn't here or there," said Tom after a pause. "What are we to do just now?"

"Let us push on to town first," answered Songbird. "After that, we can rearrange our plans if we wish."

This was considered good advice, and once again they urged their steeds along. Coming to a high point in the trail, they made out Caville a mile distant, and rode into the town about noon.

It was not much of a place, and the single hotel afforded only the slimmest of accommodations. But they had to be satisfied, and so made the best of it.

The meal over, Dick strolled into the office of the tavern, where he found the proprietor sitting in a big wooden chair leaning against the counter.

"Quite a town," began the eldest Rover cheerfully.

"Wall, it ain't so bad but what it might be wuss, stranger. Did the grub suit ye?"

"It did."

"Glad to hear it, stranger. Sometimes the folks from the big cities find fault. Expect me to run a reg'lar Aster-Delmonicum, or sumthin' like that."

"It is very hard to suit everybody," said Dick. "By the way," he went on, "do you know a man around these parts named Sack Todd?"

"Do I know him? To be sure I do, stranger. Friend o' yourn?"

"Not exactly, but I have met him a few times. Where does he live?"

"Lives over to Red Rock ranch, quite a few miles from here."

"Alone?"

"Not exactly. He has a cousin there, I believe, and some others. But I wouldn't advise you to go over to the ranch, nohow."

"Why?"

"Sack Todd don't take to visitors. The story goes that a visitor once stopped there an' shot his wife and robbed her, an' since that time he ain't had no use fer anybody, only them as he knows very well."

"Does he run the ranch for a living?"

"Don't know but what he does, but he don't work very hard a-doin' it."

"Is there an old man working for him—a fellow with thin shoulders and reddish hair?"

"Yes; an' he's a sour pill, too."

"He must be an odd stick, to keep himself so close."

"Yes; but Sack's a good spender, when he's in the humor of it. Sometimes he comes to town with a wad o' money an' treats everybody right an' left. Then ag'in he comes in an' won't notice nobody."

Here the talk came to an end, for the hotel man had to attend to some new arrivals. Dick joined the others and all took a walk, so that their conversation might not be overheard.

"This only adds to the mystery," said Tom after Dick had repeated what the tavern keeper had said. "I am more anxious now than ever to visit Red Rock ranch, as they call it."

"So am I," added Sam. "And remember, we want to catch Dan Baxter if we can."

"Well, we can't go ahead and back too, boys," came from Dick. "If we really mean to investigate, we ought to send Mr. Denton and the ladies and the girls word. If we don't, and we are delayed any great length of time, they will be sure to worry about us."

"Maybe we can telephone," suggested Songbird. "Don't you see the wires? Some of the plantations must have the service."

"That's the talk!" cried Fred. "Let us try it, anyway."

They walked to the nearest station and looked over the book. But the Denton plantation was not mentioned.

"We can send a letter," said Dick. "That will get there before they have a chance to worry."

They returned to the tavern, and there the communication was written, and later on dropped in the post-office. Then they held another consultation.

"Those fellows around that ranch are all armed beyond a doubt," said Tom. "I think we ought to get something in the shape of firearms."

"We've got a gun and a pistol now," answered Dick.

"Say, I ton't vos go pack of der been schootin' goin' on!" cried Hans. "I tole you dot Sack Todd been a pad man."

"You can remain behind, Hans," returned Sam.

"He can go on to Mr. Denton's," said Songbird.

"Not much—I stick py der crowd," said the German youth. He thought it worse to leave them than to confront any possible perils.

Their horses had been fed and cared for, and by the middle of the afternoon each was provided with a pistol, the extra weapons being secured at the local hardware establishment.

"Afraid of outlaws?" questioned the man who sold the pistols.

"There is nothing like being armed," answered Dick. "On some of these trails, there is no telling what sort of persons you will meet."

"I've got an idea," said Tom when they were on the street again. "Why not take our time and move on Red Rock ranch after dark?"

"And lose our way," came from Sam.

"Well, we can't use that trail in the daylight. That old man will be sure to halt us."

"We can get around the old man somehow," said Songbird. "As soon as we spot him, we can make a detour."

By four o'clock, they were on the way. Not to excite suspicions on the part of any of Sack Todd's friends who might happen to be around, they left Caville by a side trail and then took to the back road after the last of the houses of the town had been passed.

"I'd just like a long ride over the prairie," cried Sam. "I know I'd enjoy every minute of it."

They had proceeded less than a mile when Hans went to the front.

"I dink dis horse vants to let himself out a leetle," said he.

"I'll race you," said Sam, and away they started at a breakneck speed.

"Hold on!" cried Dick. "Don't tire yourselves out in that fashion. We've got a good many miles to go yet."

But neither of the racers paid any attention, and soon they were a good distance to the front. Hans was doing his best to keep ahead of the youngest Rover, and, as his steed was a little the better of the two, he had small difficulty in accomplishing his object.

But, alas, for the poor German boy! The race made him careless of where he was going, and soon he found himself on the very edge of a swamp, similar to that encountered before.

"Whoa!" he yelled to his horse. "Whoa!" And then he added: "Sam, go pack kvick!"

"What's wrong, Hans?"

"It ist all vet aroundt here, und I—Du meine Zeit!"

As the German youth finished, his horse stepped into a fair-sized hole on the edge of the swamp. On the instant, a cloud arose from the hole.

"Hornets!" screamed Sam, and backed away with all speed.

"Hellup! hellup!" yelled Hans. "Ouch! Oh, my!" And then he tried to back away. But the hornets were angry at being disturbed in their nest and went at him and his horse with vigor.

"Something is wrong with Hans," observed Dick, looking ahead. "See, his nag is dancing around as if it was crazy."

"Oh, me; oh, my!" roared Hans, slapping to the right and to the left. "I vos stung in more as a hundred blaces. Hellup me, somepotty! Dis vos der vorse yet alretty! Git avay, you hornets! I gif you fife dollars to git avay!"

"Ride off, Hans," called out Fred. "Don't stay near the hornets' nest. It will only make it so much the worse for you."

Thus advised, Hans backed and started off. But, instead of going off by himself, he rode directly into the crowd.

"Hi, you, keep away!" sang out Tom, and then, as a hornet alighted on his nose, he went on: "Whow! Haven't you any sense?"

"Anypotty vot vonts dem hornets can haf dem, free of charge, mit drading stamps drown in," answered Hans. "Git avay!" and he rode on.

"The cheek of him!" put in Fred, who was also bitten. "We ought to drive him back into the hole."

"Not on mine life!" said Hans. "I vos so stung now I can't see mine eyes out of, ain't it!"

All lost no time in getting away from the vicinity of the hornets' nest, and presently the pests left them and went back to the hole, to see what damage had been done.

"This is an experience I didn't bargain for," said Songbird, who had been stung in the cheek.

"Maybe you'd like to make up some poetry about it," grumbled Tom. "Oh, how my chin hurts!"

"And my ear!"

"And my nose!"

"Humph! Look at my eye!"

So the talk ran on, and the crowd looked at each other in their misery. But the sights were too comical and, despite the pain, each had to laugh at the others.

"Didn't know you had so much cheek, Songbird."

"My, what an awful smeller Fred's got!"

"Dick's left hand is a regular boxing glove."

"I'm going to put some soft mud on the hand," returned Dick. "There is nothing better to draw out the pain of a hornet's sting."

"Den gif me some of dot mut, too," said Hans. "I ton't vos care how he looks, so long as it makes me feel easier."

Mud was easy to procure, and all used it liberally, and before long the pain and swelling began to go down. But their sufferings did not cease entirely until many hours afterwards, while poor Hans could not use one eye for two days.

"After this, we had better keep our eyes open for hornets' nests," observed Dick.

"I certainly don't want to be stung again," said Sam.

"I believe a fellow could be stung to death by such pests," ventured Fred.

"Yes, and a horrible death it would be," answered Dick.

The encounter with the hornets had delayed them greatly, and it was getting toward nightfall before they went on their way again.

"We may as well take our time," said Tom. "We can't reach Red Rock ranch until to-morrow."

After crossing a level stretch of prairie, they came to the edge of a woods. Not far off was a shack similar to those to be seen all over this section of our country.

"Hullo, here is a house," cried Dick. "I wonder if anybody lives here?"

He dismounted and, walking forward, looked into the shack. On a bed of boughs a heavy-set man was sleeping.

"Hullo, there!" called out the eldest of the Rovers.

The man sat up in alarm and made a movement as if to draw a pistol.

"What do you want of me?" he asked roughly.

CHAPTER XVI

A SCENE FROM A TREETOP

"I don't know as we want anything of you," said Dick. "We chanced to be riding by, that is all."

"Oh!" The man looked relieved and let his hand drop from his pistol pocket. "Are you alone?"

"No, there is quite a crowd of us."

At this, the man leaped up and looked out of the open doorway of the shack. His face fell again when he saw so many, and all well mounted.

"May I ask what you are doing here?" he questioned, turning his sharp eyes on Dick once more.

"We are doing a bit of traveling overland. We were on a houseboat, but we got tired of riding on the Mississippi."

"I see. One of them 'personally conducted tours' a feller reads about in them magazines, eh?"

"That is pretty close to it," and Dick smiled, more to throw the man off his guard than any-thing else. He did not like the looks of the stranger in the least.

"Don't go an' git lost, young man. Have ye a guide?"

"No, but I don't think we are going to get lost. What place do you call this?" the eldest Rover continued, thinking to ask some questions himself, and thus keep the fellow from becoming too inquisitive.

"This is Pluggins' Palace;" the man gave a short laugh. "Did ye ever hear of Pluggins?"

"No."

"Pluggins was a pretty fair sort, but had a habit of stickin' his nose into other folks' business. One day, so the story goes, he went too far, and nobody has seen him since."

"Was he killed?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't ask me, stranger. He disappeared, and that was the end of him. He used to live here, and the boys writ that motto to his memory."

And the man pointed to a wall, upon which hung a board, on which had been painted the following:

ThiS iS iN MEMorY Of SiLAs plUGGinS he waS A GooD MaN bUT hE coULD NOT kEEp HiS NOsE FRoM oTHeRS bISSnESS. tAkE wARNiNG.!

Dick read the lines with deep interest, and so did all of the others.

"They didn't know much about sign painting, but they evidently knew what they wanted to say," remarked Tom. "Do you live here now?" he added, to the strange man.

"No; I was only taking a nap, that's all."

"Are you on foot?" asked Fred.

"No, my hoss is close by." The man gave a loud whistle, and soon a slick-looking mare came into view from behind the shack. "Reckon I must be goin'." He pointed to the board on the wall. "Kind of a sign to set a feller to thinkin', eh?"

"Just a bit," returned Dick dryly.

"It don't do to stick your nose into what don't concern you. Good-by."

The man left the shack, leaped into the saddle on the mare, spoke to the steed and, in a second, was off like the wind around a turn in the woods.

"Gracious, but he can ride!" was Tom's comment. "That mare is a peach!"

"Another mystery," came from Dick. He gazed at the board on the wall.

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?" asked Songbird.

"That is an out-and-out warning—"

"Sure."

"A warning meant for just such persons as ourselves."

"You mean it is a warning to keep away from Red Rock ranch?" asked Sam.

"I do. And I think that fellow was on guard, just as the old man was on that other road."

"If he was, why didn't he stop us, then?"

"Because we took him unawares, and because he saw that we were too many for him."

"By Jinks, Dick, I think you are right!" cried Tom. "And, if you are, it is more than likely that he has gone to the ranch to warn Sack Todd."

"Exactly, and that means warning Dan Baxter, too. I tell you, boys, there is something behind all this, and I, for one, am in favor of doing our best to solve the mystery."

"I am with you."

"So am I."

"And I, Dick! You can count on me!"

"Vell, ton't I vos here, too?" came from Hans.

"But we must go slow," said Tom. "It would be nonsense to rush forward.
We'd be certain to walk into some trap."

The matter was talked over, and it was decided to leave the vicinity of the shack before making an extended halt. They did not know but what the strange man would come back accompanied by Sack Todd, Dan Baxtex and others equally willing to do them harm.

They plunged into the woods in the direction the man had taken, but, coming to a brook, rode their steeds down the watercourse for half a mile, thus completely destroying their trail. Then they came out and urged their now tired horses up a small hill, from which to get some idea of their surroundings.

"It's too dark to see a thing," announced Tom, after he and Sam had mounted to the top of a tall tree. "But I think we could get a fine view from here in the daytime."

Again they held a discussion, and it was decided to go into camp where they were. They had brought some cooked food with them, so did not have to start a fire, and, being tired, all fell asleep in short order, leaving Wags on guard, as they had done before.

When they awoke, the sun was shining brightly. Wags was missing, having gone to hunt up something to eat in the brush. All swallowed a hasty repast, washing it down with a drink from the brook. Then Tom climbed the tree again, followed this time by his big brother.

"I see a ranch—out that way!" cried the fun-loving Rover after a look around. "Dick, can't you see it?"

"Yes, Tom, and it must be the one we are seeking, for, see, there is a series of rocks behind it, and they are red."

Dick was right—the rocks were certainly there, and there could not be the slightest doubt regarding their color.

The ranch was a long, low-lying place and so far off they could see it but imperfectly.

"We may as well draw closer," said Dick, and began to climb to the ground, followed by his brother.

There was no path through the woods, and the tree branches were so low-hanging that they were willing enough to walk their horses. Soon the tangle grew so thick they were forced to dismount and proceed on foot.

"I trust we don't get into a pocket," said Sam. "It would be a job to get back the way we came."

"I see a clearing ahead," announced Songbird a little later, and presently they reached an opening, in the midst of which grew a tall pine tree.

"I'm going to shin that tree," announced Sam, and went up, and so did all of the others, reaching the topmost branches only after a difficult climb lasting ten minutes.

They were well rewarded for their efforts, for from the top of the tree they could see a long distance in all directions. But they had eyes only for the ranch, which now stood out strongly in the bright sunlight.

"I see two men walking about the place," said Sam. "But I can't make out their faces."

"There is a big wagon approaching from a road yonder," announced Dick. "It seems to be filled with hay."

They watched the approach of the wagon, which lumbered along slowly, although drawn by a pair of powerful looking horses. At last, the wagon reached a side entrance to the ranch and came to a halt, and the driver dismounted.

Five minutes passed, and then four or five men came up to the wagon. The hay, which was on top, was cast aside, revealing some machinery resting on the bottom of the wagon.

"Some farming machinery," said Fred. "But why did they have it covered with hay?"

The men tugged at one of the pieces of machinery and at last lifted it from the wagon. But, instead of setting it on the ground, they disappeared with it into the ranch.

"Hullo!" ejaculated Dick. "If that is farming machinery, why are they taking it into the house?"

"Maybe it's a heating apparatus," suggested Sam.

"Yes, they need it in this weather," said Tom sarcastically.

"Well, what is it, then?"

"That remains to be found out," said Dick. "This certainly is a place of mystery," he added. "It is assuredly no ordinary ranch."

One piece of machinery after another was carried into the ranch, until the wagon was empty. Then the turnout was taken into a big barn at the back of the ranch.

"That show is over," said Songbird. "I won-der what the next act in this drama will be?"

They remained at the top of the tree for an hour or more. During that time, they saw several men moving around the ranch and some thick smoke coming from a broad chimney, but that was all.

"How much longer are you going to stay here?" asked Sam presently.

"No longer," answered the eldest brother, starting to descend. "I am going to investigate this whole thing and find out just what it means!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE BANK BILLS ON THE TABLE

"Dick, this is a dangerous piece of business," said Fred, after the entire party was again on the ground.

"That's right," broke in Songbird. "Don't forget the warning on the wall of the shack."

"I am not afraid," answered the eldest Rover. "There is some great mystery here, and I feel it ought to be investigated. Why, those men may be bandits, or something like that, for all we know."

"They are certainly not on the level, or they wouldn't put up with a fellow like Dan Baxter," came from Sam.

"Dot ist so," said Hans. "At der same dime, ve ton't vont to put our mouths into der lion's head alretty!"

"I've got a plan," said Dick after a pause. "I do not think it a wise move for all of us to go forward at once. I think two will be enough. The others can stay here and await developments."

"Then you have got to take me with you," said Sam promptly.

"Sam, you had better let me go with Dick," put in Tom.

"No, I want to go," insisted the youngest Rover, and so it was at last decided.

"I don't see how you are going to approach that ranch in broad daylight," said Fred. "As they have guards on the road, it is more than likely they have guards around the ranch also."

"I think I'll wait until night, Fred—or at least until it is dark."

After that the boys spent the time in exploring the woods and looking over the plains beyond. They saw several wagon tracks, apparently leading to nowhere in particular, and they also found something of a cave, covered with logs and heaped-up brushwood.

"Something more to investigate," said Tom, and began to pull the brushwood away, followed by his companions. The logs followed, and there was revealed to them an opening at least twenty feet square by half that in height.

"What do you call this?" questioned Tom, as he kicked something of metal lying under a pile of dead leaves.

"It's a roller of some sort," answered Songbird. "And see, here are some cog-wheels and a lot of old shafting."

"Machinery, and quite some of it, too," murmured Dick. "They must run a regular factory of some sort here."

"I think I have solved the problem!" cried Fred. "I've read of this a number of times. This Sack Todd has a secret process of manufacturing some article and he doesn't want anybody to learn what the process is. So he has established himself here and sworn all his workmen to secrecy."

"I've heard of that myself," said Tom. "A man had a certain process of tanning leather. He kept his secret for years, until a workman got mad at him and gave the thing away."

Dick was inspecting the machinery with care. It was worn out and rusted, and hard to make out just what it was.

"Unless I am mistaken, these are parts of a printing press," said the eldest Rover.

"A printing press?" cried several of the others.

"Yes. But that doesn't solve the mystery of what the press was used for."

It was damp and unwholesome in the cave, and they were glad enough to leave it and come out into the sunlight once more. They walked back to where they had left their horses, and here procured lunch, and fed all of the animals, including Wags.

Slowly the afternoon wore away. It began to grow cloudy, and so became dark at an early hour.

"We may as well start," said Dick at last. "We can go to the edge of the woods, anyway."

"I suppose you don't know when you will be back," said Tom.

"No, but probably in three or four hours."

"Take good care of yourselves."

"We'll try to do that," put in Sam.

"If I were you, I'd not expose myself," was Fred's advice. "Those chaps are rough customers, and there is no telling what they would do if they caught you spying on them."

"That is true."

A few words more followed, and then Dick and Sam set off on their tour of inspection. Each carried a pistol, and each felt that he could take care of himself. But neither dreamed of the dire peril which he was confronting.

They had left their horses behind, and now found advancing on foot no easy task. In spots, the undergrowth was so dense they had to literally force their way through, and they also had to make two long detours to

escape swamps and treacherous bog-holes. The mosquitoes and gnats were also bad and bothered them not a little.

"I guess we are earning all we are getting out of this," grumbled Sam as he came to a halt after pulling himself through a tangle of bushes and vines. "Unless we take care, we'll have our jackets ripped off our backs."

"Do you want to turn back, Sam?"

"No, but I guess we had better go a little slower."

Dick was willing, and, as a consequence, by the time the edge of the timber was reached, the sun was sinking over the hills in the West, and it was growing dark.

Red Rock ranch was now in plain view, not over two hundred yards distant. In front and to one side was a level stretch. The reddish rocks were behind, leading to a small hill. There were numerous outbuildings, and a heavy barbed fence surrounded the whole, excepting at one point, where there was a wide-swinging gate of wire and boards.

"I think the best thing we can do is to work our way around to the rocks," said Dick after studying the situation. "We can work up from the rocks to the outbuildings, and so on to the ranch itself—if we get the chance."

With caution, they skirted the woods and inside of quarter of an hour reached the first of the series of rocks. As they crouched behind these, Dick caught his brother by the arm.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. "I saw a man coming from the barn."

After that, they remained motionless for ten minutes. At a distance, they saw two men coming and going from one building to another. They were evidently caring for the horses, cattle and poultry for the night.

"They are gone," said Sam presently, as he saw the men walk toward the ranch house and disappear.

"Wait—they may come out again."

They waited, but the men did not reappear, and now it was growing darker rapidly. Look as hard as they might in all directions, they could not see a single human being.

"The coast seems to be clear now, Sam."

"Yes, but it won't hurt to wait a few minutes longer," was the answer.

As it grew darker, they saw several lights lit in the ranch. One was in the kitchen, one in what looked to be a bedroom and another in a small room in the main part of the building. The curtain over the window of the last-named room was up, and they could see the lamp quite plainly, resting on a table.

"Let us crawl up and take a look into the windows," whispered Dick. "It seems to be safe enough now. If we hear anybody coming, we can lay down in the grass or behind a bush."

Hardly daring to breathe, they crawled from the shelter of the rocks to the nearest outbuildings, one given over to some chickens. From there, they advanced to a cow shed and then to one of the big barns.

"I can see into the kitchen from here," whispered Sam. "Look!"

They looked, and by the light of a big bracket lamp, made out two men and a boy moving about the kitchen, evidently preparing the evening meal. The door to the next room was open, and they caught a glimpse of several men at a table eating, or waiting to be served.

"I'd like to know if Dan Baxter is in that crowd," said Dick.

They watched the scene for several minutes, but if the former bully of Putnam Hall was present he did not show himself. Then a curtain was drawn down, shutting off their view.

They next moved to the bedroom window, and there beheld a man lying on a couch, smoking a pipe. He seemed to be a refined individual, with a clean-shaven face and curly black hair.

"He doesn't look as if he belonged to this crowd," was Dick's comment.
"He looks as if he might be a thorough gentleman."

"He certainly looks like a city man," answered Sam. "Perhaps he has come to see this Sack Todd on business."

"Perhaps."

They watched the man for several minutes and saw him get a letter from his pocket and read it attentively. Then he closed his eyes as if to take a nap, throwing his pipe on a chair.

"Whoever he is, he is making himself at home," observed the youngest
Rover.

"Let us move on to the next window," said his brother. "Now is our best chance to size up the place—while most of the crowd are getting their supper."

As silently as before, they moved along in the darkness to where the light was streaming from the third window, not far from a corner of the ranch. Then each of the boys raised himself up with the slowness of an Indian on a trail.

Nobody seemed to be in the room, and, growing bolder, they drew nearer, until they could get a good view of the interior. They saw a table and several chairs, and also a desk and a safe. On the table was the lamp, and beside this, several piles of new, crisp bank bills.

"My gracious! Look at the money!" gasped Sam. "Why, there must be thousands and thousands of dollars there, Dick!"

"You are right."

"Sack Todd must be very wealthy."

"Unless—" and the eldest Rover paused.

"Unless what?" "Unless those bank bills are counterfeit."

CHAPTER XVIII

DICK AND SAM BECOME PRISONERS

"Do you really think those are counterfeit, Dick?" gasped Sam.

"More than likely. Don't you remember the machinery? That printing press—"

"Yes, yes! It's as clear as day. This must be a regular den, and Sack Todd—"

Sam got no further, for, at that moment, he felt himself seized from behind. A pair of strong arms were thrown around him, so that he could scarcely budge.

Dick was attacked in a similar fashion, and, though both of the Rovers struggled desperately, they found that their assailants had the advantage.

"Caught you good and proper, didn't we?" came in the voice of Sack Todd.

"Let me go!" cried Dick.

"Not much, young man. Have you got the other one, Jimson?"

"I have," answered the second man, a fellow with a long nose. "And he won't get away in a hurry. I'm thinking."

"We had better take 'em inside," went on Sack Todd.

"Just as you say," answered Andy Jimson. "I reckon you boys remember me," he went on with a grin.

"You are the man who was on that lumber raft that came near running down our houseboat," said Dick.

"Struck it, fust clip. Didn't expect to meet me ag'in, did ye?"

"I did not."

"Wanted to shoot me, didn't ye?"

"Didn't you deserve it?" asked Sam boldly. "You came mighty close to sinking us."

"Oh, that was only a bit of fun on the part o' the feller who owned the raft. He knew what he was doin'. But I reckon you didn't know what you were doin' when you spied on Sack and his outfit," continued the long-nosed man sarcastically.

"They'll know what they were doing before I am through with 'em," said the owner of Red Rock ranch.

"What are you going to do with us?" demanded Dick.

"That remains to be seen."

"You had better let us go."

At this, Sack Todd set up a laugh of derision.

"You'll not leave here yet awhile, young man I heard what you and your friend said just before we closed in on you. Do you suppose I am going to let you get out and blab about what you have discovered?"

His harsh tone made both Dick and Sam shiver. They felt that they were dealing with a hardened criminal and, most likely, one who would stop at nothing in order to attain his object.

"I must say it was a fool move to let that money lay around loose," was Andy Jimson's comment, and he nodded toward the piles of bank bills.

"One of the men just brought them up, and I hadn't time to put them away," explained the owner of the ranch. "Besides, I didn't think there were spies around."

"Maybe there are more of them, Sack."

"That's so!" ejaculated Sack Todd. He turned to the boys: "Have you any friends near?"

"That is for you to find out," answered Dick. "You can be sure of one thing, though," he added. "If you don't let us go, you will get into serious trouble."

"There was a big crowd of 'em on that houseboat," put in Jimson.

"I know there was a crowd—I met 'em some days ago. We'll march these off and then look around and see if there are others," continued the owner of Red Rock ranch.

As it would have been useless to struggle, the boys did not attempt to get away. Both Sack Todd and Jimson were heavily armed, and Dick and Sam felt that they would shoot upon the slightest provocation.

The owner of the ranch uttered a shrill whistle, and in a moment two men came running out of the dining-room of the ranch. Each carried a gun.

"What's wanted, boss?" they asked.

"We have captured two spies," answered Sack Todd.

"Spies!"

"Yes. We want you to place them down below and then come and follow us. We are going to see if there are any more of them around."

The two men placed their guns over their backs and took hold of Sam and Dick.

"Don't let them slip you," added the owner of the ranch. "I reckon they're a pretty slick pair."

"They shan't slip us; eh, Spud?"

"Nary a slip, Scutty," returned the second new-comer.

"Then you don't intend to let us go?" asked Dick.

"No."

"This is a high-handed proceeding."

"Is it? Well, down here, we sometimes take the law into our own hands," chuckled the owner of Red Rock ranch.

"Then, if the law ever gets hold of you, it will go so much harder with you," said Sam.

"Bah! Do you suppose I am going to argue with a kid like you?" growled
Sack Todd. "Take 'em below," he said, turning to his men.

There was no help for it, as others were coming to the scene. As the boys marched into the ranch, they came face to face with Dan Baxter.

"Dick Rover!" gasped the bully. "And Sam! What does this mean?"

"So you know these fellows?" said one of the men.

"Of course I do. I was telling Sack Todd about them. I used to go to school with them. What are they doing here?"

"The boss and Jimson found them spying around the place."

"Oh, I see." Dan Baxter grinned. "So you've got yourselves in a nice pickle, eh?"

"Baxter, have you joined this crowd?" asked Dick.

The bully started.

"Why—that's my business," he stammered.

"Perhaps it is, but you might be in something better," put in Sam.

"Oh, you needn't preach to me!"

"Don't you know that these men are counterfeiters?" added Dick.

"You had better shut up, kid," put in one of the men. "You are in our power, and the less you say, the better off you'll be, see?"

"I have spoken nothing but the truth."

"That may be so, too; but folks don't always like to hear the truth."

"What are you going to do with them?" questioned Dan Baxter curiously.

"Put them in a place we have ready for just such skunks."

"Prisoners?"

"Sure."

"Down below?"

"That's it."

Dan Baxter grinned to himself, and then leered at Sam and Dick.

"You won't like that. It's pretty musty under-ground, and wet, too."

"I'd rather go there than do what you have done, Baxter," answered Dick.

"What have I done?"

"You have joined these law-breakers; you need not deny it."

"Humph!"

"You may think it smart, but some day you'll rue it."

"I don't think so. As it is, the law and I are not very good friends," and Dan Baxter laughed harshly.

"I can't listen to your talk all night," put in one of the men.
"March!" the latter word to the prisoners.

They had been disarmed, so there was no help for it, and they walked through the ranch to where there was a big trap-door in the floor. This was raised up, disclosing a flight of wooden steps.

"Down you go!" was the next order.

They went down, side by side, to find themselves in a narrow cellar. At a distance, they made out a light, coming from the crack of a door. A lantern was lit, and they were ordered to a passageway at the end of the cellar. Beyond was something of a cell, built of stone and heavy timbers, with a thick door that was bolted and locked.

"In you go," said one of the men, shoving Dick forward.

"Is this where you intend to keep us?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"That is for the boss to decide."

"It's a wretched place," said Sam, looking around. "It isn't fit for a dog to stay in."

"That's not my fault. You brought this on yourself," said the man.

"When a kid takes it on himself to play the spy, he must take what comes," said the other man as he shoved Sam in behind his brother.

The cell was foul-smelling and damp, and both of the boys shivered as they looked around them.

"Will you leave us a light?" asked the youngest Rover.

"We'll leave you nothing," said one of the men as he bolted and locked the heavy door. "Come on, now," he added to his companion. "The boss will be wondering what is keeping us so long."

A moment later the two men walked off, leaving poor Sam and Dick prisoners in the dark, underground cell.

CHAPTER XIX

PETER POLL, THE DOLT

After Sam and Dick had departed, the camp in the woods seemed unusually lonesome to those left behind.

"I wish I had gone along," said Tom, not once, but several times.

"Of da only come pack in safdy," was Hans' comment.

To pass the time, Songbird tried to make up some poetry, but nobody cared to listen to him, and he soon subsided. The death-like quiet felt to them as if it was the hour before the storm.

"Are you fellows going to sleep?" asked Fred as it began to grow late.

"You can go, Fred," said Tom. "I'm going to stay awake until Sam and Dick get back."

"Then I'll stay awake, too."

To tell the truth, nobody felt like sleeping, and all huddled together in a hollow, close to where the horses had been tethered. Wags came and rested his head in Tom's hand.

"Old boy, you know we are worried, don't you?" said Tom, and the dog looked up as if he understood.

It was a long time before their watches pointed to midnight. Then Songbird stretched himself.

"I am so sleepy I can scarcely keep my eyes open," he said with a yawn.

"Then go to sleep," said Tom.

"I take a leetle nap, too," said Hans, and soon both were slumbering, leaving Tom and Fred on guard. They wished they had a fire—it would make things more cheerful—but they did not dare to indulge themselves, for fear their enemies might see the light.

By the time it was three in the morning, even Fred could hold out no longer. He dropped off, leaving Tom to keep the vigil by himself. But soon Songbird started up.

"Have they come back, Tom?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"They must be making some wonderful discoveries. Hullo! so the others went to sleep, too? Don't you want a nap?"

"Well, I'll take forty winks, if you'll promise to keep a good lookout."

"I'll do that. I'm as fresh as a daisy now."

Tom leaned back against a tree, and in a minute more was in slumberland. When the others awoke, they did not disturb him, consequently it was some time after sunrise when he opened his eyes.

"I declare! I've had a regular sleep!" he cried. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"We didn't think it necessary," said Fred.

"Have they got back?"

"No."

At this, Tom's face grew serious.

"That's strange, and I must say I don't like it."

"Oh, I guess they'll show up before a great while," answered Fred. "They couldn't travel very well in the dark. If they tried it, they'd be sure to get lost."

Once more, they unpacked the provisions they had brought along and made a leisurely break-fast. Then they packed their things again and waited.

"I am going up to the top of a tree and take another look around," announced Tom about ten o'clock. He could scarcely stand the suspense.

"I'll do the same," said Songbird, and soon they were in the top of a tall tree and gazing axiously in the direction of Red Rock ranch.

The place looked to be deserted.

"Not a sign of Dick and Sam anywhere," said the fun-loving Rover.

For reply, Songbird hummed softly to himself:

"The woods and plains are everywhere,
But for those things we do not care.
In every nook and every place
We look for a familiar face.
What has become of those we cherish?
Are they alive, or did they perish?"

"Don't go on that way, Songbird, you give a fellow the blues," cried Tom. "If I thought Dick and Sam had perished—"

"Merely a figure of speech, Tom. I had to find a word to rhyme with cherish, that's all."

"And such a word is rarish, I suppose," murmured Tom. "Honest, this is no joking matter," he continued soberly.

"I know it, and I wish Sam and Dick were back."

They continued to watch the ranch and presently saw a boy come out with a bundle under his arm and a fishing pole over his shoulder.

"There's a boy, and he is coming this way!" cried the poetic youth.

They watched the boy as long as they could and saw him turn to the northward and take to a trail running close to a fair-sized stream.

"I think he is going fishing," said Tom. "I'd like to run across him and question him."

They watched the boy as long as they could, and then climbed down the tree and told the others of what they had seen.

"I am going after him," said Tom. "You stay here until I get back."

"I am going along," said Songbird, and so it was arranged.

A few minutes of walking brought them to the stream of water, and they walked along the bank of this a distance of quarter of a mile, when Tom called a halt.

"There is the boy now—sitting on a rock, fishing," he whispered. "Don't scare him off."

They crept into the shelter of the trees and came out again directly behind the boy, who had just landed a good-sized fish and was baiting up again. He was a small boy, with an old-looking face covered with a fuzz of reddish hair. He had yellowish eyes that had a vacant stare in them.

"Hullo!" cried Tom.

The boy jumped as if a bomb had gone off close to his ear. His fishing pole dropped into the stream and floated off.

"Out for a day's sport?" asked Tom pleasantly.

The boy stared at him and muttered something neither Tom nor Songbird could understand.

"What did you say?" asked the fun-loving Rover.

"Poor fishing pole!" murmured the boy. "Now Peter can't fish any more!"

"Is that your name—Peter?" asked Tom. He saw that the boy was not just right in his mind.

"Yes."

"Peter what?"

"No, no! Peter Poll—pretty Peter Poll, who will be rich some day—if he does not tell all he knows," said the boy, repeating the words in parrot-like fashion.

"Do you live at Red Rock ranch?" asked Songbird.

The boy bobbed his head up and down vigorously.

"With Mr. Sack Todd?"

Again the boy nodded.

"What do you do there?"

"Wash dishes and cook. But Peter will be rich some day—if he doesn't tell all he knows," went on the boy. Then, of a sudden, he flapped his two arms and crowed like a rooster.

"He is a dolt!" whispered Songbird to Tom, and the latter nodded.

"The poor fishing pole—it will be drowned," went on the dolt.

"Never mind, I'll pay you for it, Peter," said Tom, and drew a silver coin from his pocket. "So you live with Mr. Todd. How do you like it?"

"Peter must not tell all he knows."

"Does he treat you kindly?"

"Peter gets sugar sometimes—and he is to have a pipe and tobacco soon."

"Did you see anything of two strangers last night?" continued Tom in a sterner tone. "Two boys about my own age?"

"Peter must not tell—"

"You answer me, or it will be the worse for you!" and now Tom caught the simple-minded youth by the collar. He did not intend to harm the lad, but he wanted to make him speak.

"Oh, oh! let me go!" screamed the dolt. "Let me go for a hundred-dollar bill! A brand new one!"

"A what?" asked Songbird curiously.

"Peter must not tell all—"

"You answer my question," broke in Tom, facing the boy and searching his eyes. "Did you see those two boys last night or not?"

"Peter must not—"

"Answer!" and now Tom had the lad by the ear.

"Yes—yes—I saw them."

"Did anybody else see them?"

"Peter must not—"

"Peter, do you want to be drowned in the river?"

"No, no!"

"Then tell me all you know about the boys."

"Sack Todd will kill me! Peter must not tell—"

"Did Sack Todd see the boys?"

"Yes; he caught them—he and Andy Jimson—at the window! Peter must not tell—"

"Caught!" gasped Tom. "Were they made prisoners?"

The boy nodded, and then crowed like a rooster once more.

"Where were the prisoners put?"

"Down, down, down—in the deep hole where the water flows—down where they want to put Peter if he tells all he knows. But I shan't tell anything—not a thing!" and his eyes blazed fiercely. "Not a thing!"

"Poor Dick and Sam have been captured and are prisoners in some vile place," groaned Tom. "What will become of them?"

CHAPTER XX

AN OFFER FROM THE ENEMY

"This is a cheerful outlook, I must say. I wonder how long it is going to last?"

The question came from Sam, after an hour had been spent in the damp and lonely cell under Red Rock ranch.

"That is a riddle to me, Sam," answered Dick. "I don't think they will let us go in a hurry. We have learned too much."

"Do you imagine they will find Tom and the others?"

"I hope not. If they do, we'll be in a pickle, for I guess it will be Tom and the others who will have to get us out of this hole."

"I wish we had a light."

"I am afraid it would do us small good. This seems to have been built for a regular prison, and I suppose the only way out is through the door, and that is securely fastened."

The two Rovers were in no cheerful frame of mind. They realized that Sack Todd was much exercised over the fact that they had discovered the secret of the ranch, and what he would do to them in consequence there was no telling.

"Perhaps we'll never get away from here alive!" cried Sam after another talk.

"Oh, I don't think he'll dare to go as far as that, Sam. He knows we have friends and that they will do all in their power to rescue us or find out what has become of us."

Another hour went by, so slowly that it seemed three. Then, of a sudden, Dick uttered an exclamation.

"I've struck a prize, Sam!"

"What is it?"

"A bit of candle."

"Humph! What good will that do, if you haven't any match?"

"But I have several matches," answered the eldest Rover, and a second later came a faint scratch, and then the bit of candle, dirty and mouse-gnawed, was lit.

It was not much of a light, but it was far better than nothing, and both boys felt light-hearted when they could see each other once more.

"Let us make another examination of the hole," suggested Dick. "Something may have slipped us before."

They went over each part of the walls with great care. On one side, a portion of the stones was set in squarely.

"This looks as if they had at one time closed some sort of a passageway here," remarked Dick. "I should like to know what is beyond."

"Can't we pick out one or two stones?"

"We can try."

The candle was set down on the stone flooring, close to the wall, and the two lads started to work without delay. In a corner of his jacket, Dick found an old jack-knife that had not been taken away from him, and this he used on the mortar. Sam had nothing but a long, rusty iron nail, so their progress was necessarily slow.

"Don't seem to be making much headway," observed Sam, after pegging away for a while. "Wish we had a hammer and a cold chisel."

"If we used a hammer they could hear us, Sam."

At last they had one stone loose and pulled it out of the wall. Holding up the light, they saw that there was a wall of plain dirt behind it.

"Beaten!" muttered the youngest Rover, and a disappointed look came over his face. "Dick, we have had our labor for our pains."

"I am not so sure of that, Sam."

"Why not, I'd like to know? That doesn't look much like a passageway."

"That is true, but we may be able to dig through the dirt without great trouble, and if this spot is close to the outer wall of the building—"

"Oh, I see," and Sam's face took on a more hopeful look. "But it might take a long time, anyway," and his face fell once more.

They had just started to loosen a second stone, when the candle began to splutter. They saved it as much as they could, but in five minutes it flickered for the last time and went out, leaving them in a darkness that seemed more intense than ever.

"We might as well continue to work," said Dick as bravely as he could.
"There is nothing else to do."

But, at the end of an hour, they had to give up the task. All of the stones around the hole they had made refused to budge, and, as the opening was not over eight inches in diameter, it availed them nothing.

"It is no use, Sam," said Dick finally. "We are simply wearing ourselves out for nothing. Give it up."

Both boys were exhausted, but were too much disturbed to take a good sleep. Yet, as they sat on a bench, the eyes of each closed, and he took a series of naps, arousing at every unusual sound that penetrated to the underground cell.

Overhead, everything had become unusually quiet, but toward morning came heavy footsteps, and they heard the opening and closing of an outer door.

"Somebody has come in," said Sam. "I wonder if it is the party that went to look for Tom and the others?"

"More than likely. I wish I knew if they discovered anything, or if Tom managed to keep out of sight."

Again there was silence, and once more the boys dozed off, not to rouse up until there came the unlocking of the cell door. Sack Todd stood there, lantern in hand, and beside him Andy Jimson.

"Hope you had a good night's sleep," said the owner of Red Rock ranch.

"Fine," answered Dick sarcastically. "Your feather beds can't be beat."

"And the quilts were extra warm," put in Sam, catching his cue from his brother.

"Humph! Your night here doesn't seem to have tamed you down much," growled Sack Todd.

"I said they were gamy youngsters," came from the long-nosed man. "They showed that when they were on the houseboat."

"I want to question you," said Sack Todd, setting down his lantern. "How many were there in your party?"

"How many did you catch?" questioned Dick, at the same time pinching his brother's arm to make Sam keep quiet.

"You answer my question, boy!" growled the owner of the ranch.

"Why don't you answer mine?"

"I am not here to answer questions."

"Who said I was, then?"

"You are a prisoner."

"You had better answer up, if you know what's good fern you," broke in Andy Jimson. "Sack doesn't stand for any nonsense."

"Tell me, how many were in your party?" repeated the owner of the ranch.

"Something less than half a hundred."

"What!" The owner of Red Rock ranch leaped to his feet, and then sat down again on a bench opposite the two Rovers. "You are fooling."

"All right; then don't question me."

"They must have organized a regular searching party," burst out the long-nosed man. "If they did, Sack, we are in for it."

"It's all talk, Andy. They couldn't get up such a party around here. Folks know better than to bother me. Besides, they know I am a good spender, and they like to help, not hinder, me," and the ranch owner winked.

"Are you boys going to tell me the plain truth, or not?" demanded Sack Todd after a pause.

"What I want to know is: what do you intend to do with us?" returned Dick.

"That will depend on yourselves, young man."

"Will you explain?" asked Sam.

"You came here entirely uninvited—you have got to take the consequences."

"That doesn't explain anything," put in Dick.

"You have learned a very important secret. If that secret was given to the world at large, it would spell ruin for me and all of my associates," went on Sack Todd.

"That is your fault, not ours."

"Bah! Don't talk like a child, Rover. Do you think I'll allow a couple of boys to ruin me? Not much!"

"Well, what do you intend to do keep us prisoners?"

"I must see about the others first. After that, I'll make you an offer."

"What sort of an offer?" broke in Sam.

"You'll either have to join us, or take the consequences."

"Join you!" gasped Sam and Dick in a breath.

"That is what I said."

"I'll never do it!" came quickly from Dick.

"It's foolish to think of it," added Sam. "We are not criminals."

"You had better give the matter careful consideration. If you won't join us—" The ranch owner paused.

"What?" asked both boys.

"I shouldn't like to say. One thing is certain, though: you shall never leave Red Rock ranch to expose us."

"That's the talk!" put in Andy Jimson. "You had better make up your mind to join us, just as that other young fellow did."

"You mean Dan Baxter?"

"Yes."

"Has he really joined?" questioned Dick with interest.

"To be sure he has, and he'll make a good thing out of it, too."

"In what way?"

"In what way? Can't he have all the spending money he wants? What more does a fellow need?"

"Counterfeit money, you mean?"

"What's the difference, so long as it passes?"

"Maybe you'll get caught passing it some day," said Sam.

"It is not likely. We are careful, and the money made here is very close to the real thing."

"Don't tell the kids everything," broke in Sack Todd.

At that moment there came a shrill whistle from the top of the stairs leading to the cell.

"Hullo! I'm wanted!" cried the owner of Red Rock ranch. "Come on, Andy, we'll finish this talk some other time." And he stepped to the doorway. Both were soon outside, the door was fastened as before, and off the men hurried, leaving Sam and Dick in anything but a comfortable frame of mind.

CHAPTER XXI

THROUGH THE FOREST

The knowledge that Sam and Dick had been made prisoners by those at
Red Rock ranch was most discouraging to Tom and Songbird.

"They are in a hole in the ground," said the fun-loving Rover. "That must mean that they are in some sort of dungeon."

"More than likely they have a place for prisoners at the ranch," returned Songbird. "The question is, now that we have learned so much: what's to do about it?"

"We must rescue Sam and Dick."

"That may be easier said than done, Tom. My idea is, the fellows at the ranch are desperate characters—horse thieves, or worse."

"No horse thieves there!" burst out Peter Poll, who had listened to the talk in wonder. "Sack Todd is rich—piles of money, piles. But Peter must not tell all he knows!" he added with a whine.

"So Sack Todd is rich?" questioned Tom.

"Piles of money—fine bank bills, I can tell you! Some day Peter will be a millionaire! But Peter must not tell—"

"Say, perhaps this dolt isn't telling the truth," cried Songbird.
"He seems to be more than a button short."

"Button, button, who's got the button!" sang out the foolish boy. "Played that once—lots of fun. Let us play now." And he started to pull a button from his jacket.

"Come with us, Peter," said Tom. "Come, we won't hurt you."

"Where do you want Peter to go?"

"Not very far away. Come, we will give you something nice to eat."

Now, as it happened, eating was one of the dolt's weak points, and he readily consented to accompany them. Without loss of time, they made their way back to where Fred and Hans had been left.

"Hullo! who vos dot?" ejaculated the German youth as they hove in sight.

"This is a boy we picked up along the stream," answered Tom, and then drew the others aside and told his story.

"What are you going to do next?" questioned Fred seriously. "It is certainly too bad Sam and Dick are prisoners. We must take care that we are not captured."

"The mystery of the ranch grows deeper," said Songbird. "I rather wish we had some officers of the law to consult. We could then ride right up to the ranch and make our demands."

"It may come to that before we get through," answered Tom.

"That dolt may not be telling the truth, Tom."

"Well, he has told some truth anyway, for if Sam and Dick are free, why don't they show up here?"

They did their best to make Peter Poll tell them more concerning himself and those at the ranch. But the foolish boy was growing more and more suspicious, and would scarcely answer a question.

"Peter wants the fine eating you promised him," said he, but when they spread before him the best the camp afforded, he broke into a wild laugh of derision.

"Call that good!" he shrieked. "That is nothing! You ought to see one of the spreads at the ranch—especially when the men from Washing-ton

and Chicago come down. Everything of the best to eat and to drink! This is plain cowboy food. Peter wants something better—roast lamb, peas and pie!"

"This is the best we have, Peter," said Tom. "I am sorry you do not care for it. So they have feasts at the ranch, eh?"

"Peter must not tell all he knows." The foolish boy started up. "Peter is going."

"Don't go yet!" cried Tom.

"Peter must go to the other ranch—boss told him so—after he got through fishing. Going now." And, with a sudden jerk, he tore himself loose and was off like the wind among the trees.

"Hi!" cried Songbird. "Hadn't we better stop him?"

Tom was already after the dolt. But the foolish boy seemed to have legs like those of a deer for swiftness, and before they realized it he was out of sight. He knew how to run with but little noise, so it became almost impossible to follow him.

"Will he go back to the ranch, do you think?" asked Fred after the momentary excitement was over.

"He said something about going to the other ranch," returned Tom. "What he meant by it, I don't know."

"Well, he is gone, so we shall have to make the best of it," went on Fred. "I trust, though, that he doesn't get us into trouble."

The boys sat down in the temporary camp, and there Tom and Songbird gave all the details of how they had fallen in with Peter Poll.

"I suppose those rough characters make him do all sorts of dirty work," said Fred. "The boy isn't really responsible."

After a long consultation, it was decided to leave the neighborhood and move to the other side of Red Rock ranch. This would tend to throw

the enemy off the trail, if the dolt should go back and relate what had occurred.

"Dis vos gitting so interesting like a story book," was Hans' comment. "I only vish I could see der last page alretty!"

"We all wish that," laughed Tom. "Then we'd know if the villain dies and the girl marries the millionaire," and this sally brought forth a short laugh.

The things were packed rapidly, and soon they were on horseback and leading the steeds Sam and Dick had ridden. They had to ford the stream where the dolt had been captured, and here the horses obtained a refreshing drink.

"Some day I suppose this whole forest will fall before the woodman's ax," remarked Songbird. "Too bad!" and then he murmured to himself:

"The sturdy woodman with his ax
Will strike full many a blow,
And as the chips go flying fast
He'll lay these giants low,
Until the ground is bare and void
Of all this grateful shade—"

"And then the planter beans can plant
With plow, and hoe, and spade," finished Tom. "Beans would pay better than trees any day."

"Beans!" snorted Songbird in disgust. "What have beans to do with poetry?" and he walked ahead so that he might make up his verses without further interruption.

They soon found the ground getting very rough, and the tangle through which Sam and Dick had passed made them do not a little complaining.

"Mine cracious! How long vos dis to last, hey?" cried poor Hans as he found himself in a tangle from which he could not escape. "Hellup, somepody, oder I ton't vos git out of dis annyhow!"

"Hans is stuck on this brushwood," sang out Fred. "He loves it so he can't bear to leave it."

"This way, Hansy, my boy," came from Tom. "Now then, a long pull, a strong pull and a pull altogether!"

With might and main he hauled on the German boy's arm, and with a tearing sound Hans came loose and almost pitched forward on his face.

"Hi! hi! let go alretty kvick!" he bawled. "Mine clothes vos most tore off of me." He felt of his trousers and the back of his jacket. "Too pad! Da vos full of vinders now!"

"Never mind, Hansy, you need the openings for ventilation," returned Tom smoothly.

"Vendilations, hey? Vot you know about him, hey? I vos look like a ragpickers alretty!" And he surveyed the damaged suit dubiously.

"Now is the time to have your picture taken," suggested Fred. "You can send it to your best girl, Hans."

"I ton't vos got no girls."

"Then send it to your grandma," suggested Tom blandly. "Maybe she'll take pity on you and send you a new suit. That would suit, wouldn't it?"

"I ton't vos do noddings, but ven ve go to camp again, I make you all sit town und blay tailors," answered the German boy; and then the whole crowd pushed forward as before.

They had to cross a tiny brook, and then began to scramble over some rather rough rocks. This was hard work for the horses, and a consultation was held regarding the advisability of leaving them behind.

"I would do it in a minute," said Tom. "But it may not suit us to come back this way."

"Yes, and we may need the horses to ride away on," put in Fred. "Supposing those men on the ranch come after us? We can't get away very well on foot, and, if we could, we wouldn't want to leave the horses behind." And so it was decided to go slowly and take the steeds along.

It was growing dark, and they were afraid they were in for another storm. So far, there had been no breeze, but now the wind began to rush through the trees with a mournful sound.

"If it does come, it will surely be a soaker," announced Tom when he got to an opening where he could survey the sky. "Perhaps it will pay us to stay in the shelter of the forest."

"Yes, and have the lightning bring a tree down on us," added Fred. "None of that for me."

They were still among the rocks when it began to rain. At first, the drops did not reach them, but, as the storm increased, the water began to fall in all directions from the branches.

"We must find some shelter, unless we want to be soaked," said Fred. "Hullo, just the thing! Couldn't be any better if we had it made to order."

He pointed to a spot where the rocks arose to a height of twenty or more feet. Low down was an opening leading to a hollow that was very like a cave.

"That will do first-rate," returned Tom. "It is large enough for the whole crowd."

"Too bad the horses can't get in, too," said Fred. "But maybe a wetting won't hurt them in this warm weather."

The steeds were tied close by, and then the boys ran for the shelter under the rocks, followed by Wags. They had just reached it when the storm broke in all its violence, and the rain came down in torrents.

CHAPTER XXII

IN A SNAKES' DEN

"Just in time, and no mistake," remarked Songbird as he surveyed the scene outside. "No use of talking, when it rains down here, it rains!"

"Well, a rainstorm isn't a picnic party," returned Tom. "I wouldn't care so much if I wasn't so anxious to hear from Sam and Dick."

"Dot is vot ve all vonts," broke in Hans.

They crouched in the back of the shelter, so that the rain might not drive down upon them. It was a steady downpour for half an hour, when it began to slacken up, and the sun looked as if it might break through the clouds once more.

"We won't be detained so long, after all!" cried Fred.

"I am just as well satisfied," began Tom, and then gave a jump. "Boys, look there! Did you ever see anything like it?"

They looked in the direction pointed out, and each one sprang up as if he had received an electric shock, while Wags began to bark furiously. And small wonder, for directly in front of the shelter was a collection of snakes numbering at least thirty or forty. They were black, brown and green in color and from two to four feet in length. Some were lying flat, while others were curled up in various attitudes.

"Snakes!" faltered Fred. "And what a lot of them!"

"Dere ain't no choke apout dis!" gasped Hans, his eyes almost as big as saucers. "Vot shall ve do?"

"Get your pistols, boys!" came from Songbird, and he drew his weapon.

"Don't shoot!" and Tom caught the other by the arm. "If you kill one snake, the others will go for us sure. What an awful lot of them! This locality must be a regular snakes' den."

"If they come in here, we'll all be bitten, and if they are poisonous—" Fred tried to go on, but could not.

"There is no telling if they are poisonous or not," returned Tom. "One thing is sure, I don't want them to sample me," and the others said about the same.

What to do was at first a question. The snakes lay about ten feet from the front of the shelter and in a semicircle, so that the boys could not get out, excepting by stepping on the reptiles or leaping over them.

"They are coming closer!" exclaimed Fred a moment later. "It looks as if they were going to tackle us, sure!"

"I have a plan," cried Tom. "Come here, Hans, and let me boost you up."

The others understood, and while the fun-loving Rover gave the German boy a boost, Songbird did the same for Fred.

The edge of the cliff of rocks was rough, and, when hoisted up, Hans and Fred were enabled to grasp at several cracks and projections. They laid hold vigorously and soon pulled themselves out of harm's way.

By this time, the snakes had wiggled several feet closer to the shelter. Evidently, it was their den and, while they wished to get in, they did not know exactly what to do about the intruders.

"Can you get a hold?" questioned Songbird as he stood on a flat rock and raised himself into the air a distance of two feet.

Tom was already trying to do so, and soon he was crawling up the edge of the cliff. As the rocks were slippery from the rain, it was by no

means an easy or sure task. But he advanced with care, and soon joined Fred and Hans at the top.

"I am glad we are out of that!" exclaimed Fred. "Ugh! how I do hate snakes!"

"I think everybody does," returned Tom. "Hi, Songbird!" he called out. "Coming?"

"I—I guess I am stuck!" was the gasped-out answer. "The rocks are too slippery for me."

"We'll give you a hand up," sang out the fun-loving Rover, and got down at the edge of the rocks.

"Look out that you don't slip over," came in a warning from Fred.

"Of you go ofer, you land dem snakes your head on," put in Hans.

The words had scarcely been uttered, when there came a wild shriek from Songbird. The poetic youth had lost his hold and slipped to the ground below. He came down directly on top of three of the snakes, and with an angry hissing they whipped around him.

"Songbird has fallen on the snakes!"

"Run for your life!" sang out Tom. "There goes Wags!"

And Songbird did run the moment he could regain his feet. One snake got tangled up in the boy's legs and was carried along, whipping one way and another. But it soon lost its hold and then wiggled through the grass to rejoin its fellows. In the meantime, the dog had disappeared.

"Are you safe?" called out those at the top of the cliff.

"I—I—guess so," came in a panting answer. "But two of them did—did their be-best to bite me!"

"Bring the horses around while you are about it," said Tom, and then the three on the cliff walked around to rejoin Songbird. When they reached him, they found the poetic youth trembling from head to foot.

"Never had such an experience in all my life," said he. "Why, I came down almost headfirst on those snakes! I never want such a thing to, happen again."

"I've got no use for snakes," said Tom. "I don't know what they are good for, excepting to scare folks."

"I believe they rid the land of many insects."

"Say, Songbird, I tole you vot," put in Hans, with a twinkle in his eye now that the danger was past. "You vos make a nice poem up apout dem snakes, hey?"

"A poem on snakes?" shivered Songbird. "Ugh! the idea is enough to give one the creeps!"

The rain had now ceased completely, and soon they were leading their horses forward as before. It was very wet in the brushwood and, as far as possible, they kept to the open spaces. The outlook was certainly a dismal one, and the boys felt in anything but a good humor.

"Our little trip to Mr. Denton's ranch isn't panning out so beautifully, after all," remarked Fred. "I thought we were going to have the nicest kind of an outing. All told, I rather think I would prefer to be back on the houseboat."

Presently they came' out on a road in the rear of Red Rock ranch. There was a ditch to cross, and then a line of thorns, which gave all more than one scratch.

Suddenly they were startled by a shot, fired at a distance. Another shot soon followed.

"What does that mean?" cried Fred. "Where's the dog?"

"Perhaps Sam and Dick are trying to escape," returned Songbird.

"I hope nobody is shooting them," put in Tom. "I must say," he added, "I don't like this at all. The dog is gone."

"Hadn't we better place the horses in the woods and investigate?"

"No, we'll take the horses along, and if there is trouble, we'll use our pistols," answered Tom firmly.

They advanced with caution, and soon came to where the road made a turn westward. Tom uttered an exclamation of surprise, and not without good reason.

"Man—on the road—flat on his face!"

"Is he a spy?"

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know," answered Tom. "Go slow—we may be running into a trap."

They advanced with caution. Not another soul seemed to be in sight, and presently they stood over the man. He was breathing heavily.

"Looks like a planter," observed Fred, noticing the apparel the stranger wore. "What's the matter with him?"

"Perhaps he was shot. Let us turn him over."

This they proceeded to do, and then, without warning, the man sat up and rubbed his eyes. His wig and beard fell off, and to Tom's astonishment there was revealed James Monday, the government detective.

"Mr. Monday!" cried the boy. "How in the world did you get here?"

"Wha—who are you?" stammered the man. "Wha—what hit me?"

"I don't know what hit you. I am Tom Rover. Don't you remember me?"

The government official looked perplexed for a moment, and then his face brightened.

"To be sure I remember you, Rover," he stammered. "But I am all in a twist." He brushed his hand over his face. "I thought I was down and out, as the saying goes."

"Did you fire those shots?"

"I fired one shot. The other was fired by a man who ran away. I believe the villain wanted to take my life. The bullet struck a rock and then struck and stunned me, and I keeled over."

"And the man ran away?"

"I suppose so. You didn't see him, did you?"

"No."

"Where are you bound?" went on the government official curiously.

"We are looking for my two brothers, Sam and Dick. They went over to the ranch yonder, and we have heard that they are being held prisoners."

CHAPTER XXIII

JAMES MONDAY TAKES A HAND

After that, there was nothing to do but to tell their story in detail, to which the government official listened with close attention. Then he asked them many questions.

"You are certainly in hard luck," said he when they had finished. "Beyond the slightest doubt, those men at the ranch are desperate characters, and I don't know but what I ought to summon help and arrest them on the spot."

"Den vy not do dot?" asked Hans. "Ve vill hellup, too."

"If those men are what I take them to be, I want to catch them red-handed," responded James Monday.

"What do you take them to be?" asked Tom.

"Can I trust you boys to keep a secret?"

"Yes," came from each of the crowd.

"Then I'll tell you. Unless I am very much mistaken, the men at Red Rock ranch are counterfeiters."

"Counterfeiters!" came in a chorus.

"So I believe. I may be mistaken, but all the evidence I have points in that direction. I have been following this trail from Philadelphia, where I caught a fellow passing bad twenty-dollar bills. He confessed that he got the bills from a fellow in Washington who claimed to be printing them from some old government plates. That story was, of course, nonsense, since no government plates of such a bill are missing. I followed the trail

to Washington, and there met a crook named Sacord. He, so I discovered, got his money from two men, one the owner of this ranch. Where the bad bills were manufactured was a mystery, but, by nosing around, I soon learned that the owner of the ranch never allowed strangers near his place, and that he sometimes had strange pieces of machinery shipped there. Then I put two and two together and came to the conclusion that the bad bills were printed here. Now, I want to prove it, and not only round up the gang, but also get possession of the bogus printing plates. If the government don't get the plates, somebody may keep on manufacturing the bad bills."

"In that case, it is just as important to get the plates as the criminals," put in Songbird.

"Well, this stumps me," declared Tom. "No wonder they kept chasing us off."

"And no wonder Sam and Dick were made prisoners," added Fred.

"I hope the rascals don't do them harm," said Tom. "If I thought that, I'd be for moving on the ranch without delay."

"I think your brothers will be safe enough for the time being," came from James Monday. "I am sorry that you let that dolt get away from you."

"If we had thought it of such importance, we should certainly have kept him a prisoner," replied Songbird.

"I was watching my chance to get into the ranch house unobserved," continued the government official. "That shot rather floored me. But I am going to get in, some way," he added with determination.

"Listen, I think I hear somebody coming!" cried Songbird.

"Let us get to the side of the road," said James Monday.

They did as advised, the boys mounting their horses and the government official donning his wig and false beard and taking Sam's steed. Soon they were stationed behind a pile of rocks.

"It's a wagon that is coming!" said Tom a minute later. "I can hear the wheels scraping on the rocks."

"I think I'll investigate on foot," said James Monday, and slipped to the ground once more. Soon the wagon came in sight. It was pulled by a team of strong looking horses and was piled high with boxes. On the seat sat an old man.

"Hullo, there!" called out the government official, stepping along the trail in the direction of the turnout.

The old man was evidently startled, and he pulled up with a jerk. As he did so, the boys rode a little closer.

"Hullo, stranger! What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you," responded James Monday.

"What about?" and the old man began to grow uncomfortable.

"Where are you bound?"

"What do ye want to know fer?"

"I am curious, that's all, friend. Are you afraid to answer me?"

"No, I ain't. I'm bound fer Red Rock ranch."

"What have you on the wagon?"

"All sorts o' supplies that came in on the railroad."

"What's your name?"

"Bill Cashaw. It seems to me you're a curious one, you are."

"Do you belong in town, or out here?"

"In town, o'course. Hain't I lived there nigh sixty-four years?"

"Do you work steadily for Sack Todd?"

"No. I do a leetle drivin' now an' then, that's all. But, see here—"

"Do you know all the others at the ranch?"

"Most on 'em. I don't know the new fellers much."

"Did you intend to stay at the ranch?"

"You mean to-night?"

"Yes."

"Not unless Sack asked me to stay. He's queer about that, you know." The old man glanced at the boys. "Quite a party o' ye, hain't there?"

"You state positively that you do not belong to the crowd at the ranch?" resumed the government official.

"I said so. But, see here, stranger—"

"Please get down off that wagon," went on James Monday quietly.

"Eh?"

"I said get down off that wagon."

"What fer?"

"Because I want you to."

"Say, are this a hold-up?" cried the old man in renewed alarm. "If it are, I hain't a-goin' to stand fer it, an' let me say that Sack Todd will be after you-uns bald-headed fer it!"

"This is not exactly a hold-up," said the detective with a faint smile. "Get down and I will explain. If you try to resist, you'll only get into trouble."

"Suppose I'll have to obey," groaned the old man as he climbed down from the seat. "You-uns are five to one on this. I'm like the coon an'

Davy Crockett—I know when ter come down out o' the tree. But I don't understand your game, stranger."

"As I said before, I don't intend to hurt you, Mr. Cashaw. But I am after certain information, and I rather think you can aid me in getting it."

"What you want to know?"

"In the first place, I want you to tell me all you know about Sack Todd. What does he do at his ranch?"

"Humph! Don't ask me, fer I don't know. An' if I did—"

"And if you did—"

"Sack's been a putty good friend ter me, stranger. Lent me a hundred dollars onct, when a fire had cleaned me out. A feller don't feel much about hurtin' his friend."

"That is so, too. Then you really don't know what is going on at the ranch? Come now, speak the truth," and James Monday's voice grew stern.

"Well, it's some sort o' patent, I guess. Sack don't want folks to git onto it. Reckon it's a new-fangled printing press—one to run by electristity—or sumthin' like that."

"He told you that, did he?"

"Yes. But I hain't goin' to answer no more questions," went on the old man, and started to mount the wagon seat again.

"Wait," said James Monday. "I am sorry, but you'll have to stay here for the present, Mr. Cashaw."

"You mean you are goin' to make me stay here?"

"For a while, yes."

"With the wagon?"

"No, I'll drive your wagon to the ranch."

"I ain't askin' you to do the job."

"I'll do it for nothing," answered the government official with a quiet smile.

"See here, I don't understand this, at all," cried Bill Cashaw. "What is yer game, anyhow?"

"If you want me to be plain, I'll tell you. I suspect the men at the ranch of a serious crime. For all I know, you are one of the gang and as bad as the rest. If so, you're face to face with a long term in prison."

"Crime? Prison? I ain't done a thing!"

"If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear, and you will do what you can to aid me in running down the guilty parties."

At this, the face of the old man became a study. He started to talk, stammered and became silent.

"Tell me!" he burst out suddenly. "Are you an officer?"

"I am—working under the United States Government."

"Oh!" The old man turned pale. "Then let me say, as I said afore, I ain't done nuthin' wrong, an' I don't want to go to prison. If them fellers at the ranch are criminals, I don't want ter work fer 'em no more, an' I'll help you to bring 'em to justice."

CHAPTER XXIV

TOM CARRIES A LETTER

After that it was a comparatively easy matter to get the old man to talk, and he told James Monday and the boys practically all he knew about Sack Todd and his followers.

He said it was commonly supposed that Sack Todd had some invention that he was jealously guarding. Some folks thought the man was a bit crazy on the subject of his discoveries, and so did not question him much concerning them. The machinery and other material which arrived from time to time were all supposed to be parts of the wonderful machine Sack Todd was having made at various places.

While he was talking, the old man looked at Tom many times in curiosity.

"Might I ask your name?" he said at length.

"What do you want 'to know that for?" returned Tom.

"Because you look so wonderfully like my son Bud—an' you talk like him, too. But Bud's skin is a bit darker nor yours."

"My name is Tom Rover."

"Talking about looking alike," broke in Fred. "There's a strong resemblance," and he pointed to the detective and the old man. "Of course, you don't look quite so old," he added to James Monday.

"I am glad that you think we look alike," smiled back the government official. "I was banking on that."

"What do you mean?" came from Songbird.

"I will show you in a minute. Mr. Cashaw, I'll trouble you to exchange hats, coats and collars with me," the detective continued, turning to the old man.

The latter did not understand, but gave up his wearing apparel a moment later, and soon James Monday was wearing them. Then the detective rubbed a little dirt on his hands and face and, with a black pencil he carried, gave himself a few marks around the mouth and eyes.

"How do you do, boys?" he called out, in exact imitation of Bill Cashaw.

"Wonderful!" ejaculated Tom. "That will do splendidly.

"Mine cracious! I ton't vos know vich been you an' vich been der old man!" burst out Hans. "You vos like two pretzels alretty!"

"That's a fine comparison," laughed Fred, and all had to smile over the German youth's words.

"I reckon I know what you intend to do," said Tom to the government official. "You want to take the old man's job away from him."

"Yes—for the time being. But I don't expect to get paid for it." James Monday turned to Cashaw. "Will you stay with the boys until I return?"

"Well, now—"

"I want you to stay."

"That means as how I'm to stay whether I want to or not, eh?"

"You can put it that way if you wish. I want to make no trouble for you."

"Sack Todd will make trouble if he hears of this," returned the old man dubiously.

"Then you had better keep out of sight."

"Will you return my horses and wagon?"

"Either that, or pay for the turnout."

"Then maybe I'd better go to town. I can say I stopped off at a tavern an' sumbuddy drove off with my rig."

"Very well," returned the detective. "But, mind you, if you dare to play me foul—"

"I won't! I won't!"

"Then you can go. But wait. Boys, let him stay here an hour. Then he can go."

So it was arranged, and a few minutes later James Monday was on the seat of the wagon and driving off in the style of the old man.

"He is certainly a good actor," murmured Tom, gazing after the government official. "I declare, the two look like two peas!"

"That's a mighty risky thing to do," observed Songbird. "If Sack Todd and his cronies discover the trick they'll stop at nothing to get square."

"Trust Mr. Monday to take care of himself," responded Tom. "I am only hoping he will be able to aid Sam and Dick."

"Oh, we all hope that, Tom."

The boys sat down on some partly dried rocks and began to ask the old man about himself. But Bill Cashaw was too much disturbed mentally to give them much satisfaction.

"Well, by hemlock!" he burst out presently.

"What's up now?" queried Tom, and all of the others looked equally interested.

"If I didn't go an' forgit all about it."

"Forget what?"

"This letter I had fer Sack. An' that was o' prime importance, too, so the trainman said."

As the old man spoke, he brought forth a letter which he had had stowed away in a pocket of his shirt.

"What's in the letter?" asked Fred.

"I don't know. It's sealed up."

"I think we'd be justified in breaking it open," put in Songbird. "Those rascals are outlaws!"

"No! no! don't break it open!" burst out Tom, and snatched the communication from the old man's hand. "I've got a better plan."

"What plan?" came from his friends.

"Didn't you say that I looked like your son Bud?" asked Tom of Bill Cashaw.

"I did."

"Has Bud ever been to Red Rock ranch?"

"Three or four times, but not lately."

"Does Sack Todd know him?"

"Yes, but not very well."

"Then that settles it," announced the fun-loving Rover. "I, as Bud Cashaw, am going to deliver the letter at the ranch."

"Tom, that's too risky!" cried Fred.

"I don't think so. I can tell them that the letter was left for father"—pointing to Bill Cashaw—"after he started for the ranch. I don't see how they can help but swallow the story."

"Yes, but see here—" interrupted the old man. "This ain't fair. I want you to understand—"

"I know what I am doing, Mr. Cashaw, and you had better keep quiet. Watch him, fellows."

Without loss of time, Tom made his preparations for visiting the mysterious ranch. He rubbed some dirt on his face and hands, disheveled his hair and turned up one leg of his trousers. Then he borrowed the rather large headgear that Hans wore and pulled it far down over his head.

"How will that do?" he drawled. "Say, is my pap anywhere around this yere ranch?"

"Mine cracious! of dot ton't beat der Irish!" gasped Hans. "Tom, you vos make a first-class detector alretty!"

"He certainly looks like an Alabama country boy," was Fred's comment.

A few touches more to his disguise and Tom was ready to depart for the ranch. He called Songbird aside.

"Watch that old man," he whispered. "He may not be as innocent as he looks. Don't let him get to the ranch. If he does, our cake will be dough."

"Of course you don't expect to catch up to the wagon," said Songbird.

"No, but if I do, I'll go ahead anyway—if Mr. Monday will let me."

It was not long after this that Tom left the others. He struck out boldly along the poorly defined wagon trail, which led over some rough rocks and down into hollows now filled with water. The marks of the wagon ahead were plainly to be seen, but, though the youth walked fast, he did not catch sight of the turnout.

It was dark by the time he came to the fence that surrounded the ranch buildings. He saw Bill Cashaw's wagon standing under a shed. Two men were unloading the contents. They were both strangers to Tom.

It must be admitted that Tom's heart beat rapidly as he stepped into view and slouched toward the wagon shed. The men started in surprise when they beheld him.

"Say, whar's my pap?" he called out. "Didn't he come in on the wagon?"

"It's Bud Cashaw," murmured one of the men. He raised his voice. "Your old man is in the house with Sack Todd."

Tom turned toward the ranch proper and was close to a door when it opened and Sack Todd came out and faced him. At a distance behind the man was James Monday.

"Hullo, pap!" sang out Tom. "You forgot that letter from that train hand—or maybe you didn't see him."

The government official stared at Tom, wondering who he could be.

"What letter?" demanded the ranch owner quickly.

"Here it is," answered Tom, and brought it forth. Sack Todd ripped it open quickly and scanned its contents. It was short and to the point:

"Look out for government detectives. They are on your track. One is named James Monday. There is also a fellow named Rover—beware of him.—NUMBER 9."

Utterly unconscious of what he was doing, Tom had played directly into the hands of Sack Todd and his evil associates.

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH TOM IS EXPOSED

"Boy, who gave you this letter?" demanded the owner of Red Rock ranch, after he had read the communication through twice.

His look was a stern one, and his gaze seemed to bore Tom through and through. Yet the lad did not flinch. He felt that he must play his part to the end.

"Feller give it at the house fer pap," he drawled. "Pap, he fergot to bring it. So I hustled off to do it."

"Humph! A nice way to treat a letter of importance," muttered Sack Todd. He gave Tom another close look. "Who told you your dad was coming here?"

"Oh, I guessed that," drawled Tom.

"Come in the house. I must question your father about this."

"I didn't mean no harm, Mr. Todd!" cried the youth in pretended alarm.
"Ain't it all' right?"

"Yes. Come in."

Sack Todd pushed Tom toward the doorway of the ranch, and the youth went inside. He looked around for the government official, but that individual was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Bill Cashaw?" asked the ranch owner of two men who were present.

"I don't know—getting something to drink, I reckon," answered one of the men. "He was standing around a minute ago."

"Sit down here," said Sack Todd, turning to Tom and at the same time motioning to a chair. "I'll be back in a minute."

He disappeared through a doorway and the fun-loving Rover sat down. He was in no easy frame of mind, for he could plainly see that the letter had disturbed the ranch owner greatly and that the man was suspicious.

"I hope I haven't made a mess of it," he reasoned. "I wonder where Sam and Dick are?"

Had he had an opportunity, he would have left the room and taken a look around the place, but the strange men were there, and they evidently had their eyes on him.

Tom had been sitting quietly for five minutes, thinking matters over, when a side door opened and a young man smoking a cigarette came in. On seeing Tom, he stared in wonder and allowed his cigarette to drop to the floor.

"Tom Rover! How did you get here?"

It was Dan Baxter, as impudent and hard-faced as ever. He came a step closer and fairly glared at Tom.

For one brief instant, Tom's self-possession deserted him. Then he recovered and stared boldly at Baxter.

"Say, what you a-talkin' about?" he drawled.

"Eh?"

"What you a-talkin' about? I don't know you—never see you before."

"Well, if that ain't the limit!" burst out the bully. "You don't know me!"

"An' my name ain't Tim Drover," went on Tom, purposely mispronouncing the name.

"Go to grass, Tom Rover! You can't play any game on me. I know you too well, even in that outfit."

At that moment Sack Todd returned. He was surprised to find Dan Baxter talking to Tom.

"Do you know Bud Cashaw?" he questioned.

"Bud Cashaw? Who is he?"

"This is Bud."

"Not much! Do you know who this is? Tom Rover, the brother I was telling you about."

"Tom Rover!" almost shouted the owner of Red Rock ranch. "Are you certain of this?"

"Yes. Didn't I go to school with him? I know him as well as I know my own father."

Sack Todd glared at Tom and gave him a close inspection. Then he shook the youth fiercely.

"So this is your style, eh?" he snarled. "First your brothers come to spy on us, and now you! If I had my way—" he stopped short. "Where did you get that letter, answer me!"

"Wasn't it all right?" drawled Tom. He scarcely knew how to act.

"Answer me, Rover. I want no more beating about the bush."

"It belongs to Bill Cashaw. Isn't he here?"

"Ha!" Sack Todd looked around. "Come here," he cried to his men. "Watch this boy and don't let him get away under any circumstances. I must find Bill Cashaw! Perhaps it isn't Bill, after all!"

One of the men came forward and caught hold of Tom, while Dan Baxter also ranged by the prisoner's side. To attempt to break away would have been useless, and Tom did not try it.

"You'll catch it now," said the bully maliciously.

"Where are Sam and Dick?"

"That remains for you to find out."

"They seem to carry things with a high hand here."

"It's Sack Todd's ranch, and he has a right to do as he pleases. He didn't invite you or the others to come," returned Dan Baxter with a scowl.

In the meantime, the owner of Red Rock ranch was hurrying around in search of the supposed Bill Cashaw. He visited the kitchen and the other rooms, and then ran to the barn and other outbuildings. But it was all useless; the driver of the wagon could not be found.

"I want all of you to hunt for the wagon driver," stormed the ranch owner. "He must be found!"

"What's wrong now?" asked Andy Jimson.

"Everything. I've just got a warning. Read it."

The long-nosed man did so, and drew down the corners of his mouth.

"This looks bad," he said. "Well, you've got the three Rovers right enough. You think—"

"That wagon driver may not be Bill Cashaw at all."

"Worse and worse, Sack. We must find him, by all means."

The search was taken up with renewed care, and four men kept at it for over an hour. Then the crowd assembled in the main room of the ranch.

"He has run away and left the horses and wagon behind," said Sack Todd.

"I thought he acted rather queer," put in one of the men. "I asked him about Cal Jessup, and he didn't seem to want to answer."

"He was a spy—there is not the least doubt of it," came from Andy Jimson. "More than likely, he was a government detective."

While the men were talking the matter over, there was the sound of hoof strokes on the road leading to the ranch door, and a horseman came up, nearly out of breath from hard riding.

"What's the news, Phil?" shouted Sack Todd. "Nothing wrong, I hope."

"Snapper has been arrested and a detective is on your trail," shouted back the horseman. "I was afraid I'd be too late. You want to get ready to vamoose."

The men of the ranch crowded around the new-comer and plied him with questions. Tom tried to catch all that was said, but was unable to do so.

"We'll have to make short work of this, I am afraid," he heard Sack Todd say, a little later.

"What about the boy?" questioned the long-nosed man.

"He ought to be shot!" was the cold-blooded reply, which made Tom shiver.

"Shall we put him with the rest?"

"Yes."

Without ceremony, poor Tom was marched away to the trap-door, a man on each side of him. Dan Baxter came behind.

"You don't like it, do you?" sneered the bully. "You'll like it still less when you get below. It's beautifully damp and musty."

"You're a cheerful brute, Dan," answered Tom.

"Hi! don't you call me a brute!" stormed Baxter.

"Oh, excuse me, I didn't mean to insult the dumb creation," responded Tom. "Baxter, you are the limit. I suppose you have joined this gang."

"What if I have?"

"I am sorry for you, that's all."

"Oh, don't preach!"

"I am not going to, for it would be a waste of breath."

"You'll sing pretty small by the time we are through with you," growled the bully; and then Tom was led below and placed in the cell with the others.

CHAPTER XXVI

TOGETHER ONCE MORE

"Tom!"

"Dick and Sam!"

"How in the world did you get here?"

"Where are the others?"

These and a dozen other questions were asked and answered as the three Rover boys shook hands over and over again. Even though prisoners, they were delighted to be together once more, and doubly delighted to know that each was well.

"Oh, these chaps are first-class rascals," said Dick after they had settled down a bit. "They have treated us most shamefully. At first, they gave us pretty good eating, but now they are starving us."

"Starving you?" cried Tom.

"Yes—they want us to tell all we know," put in Sam. "They are very suspicious."

"Didn't you try to get away?"

"No use of trying. The walls are too solid and so is the door," said Dick. He caught Tom by the arm and added in a faint whisper in his brother's ear: "They are listening. We have a hole."

"Then we'll have to stay here," said Tom loudly, catching his cue instantly.

"Yes, and it's a shame," added Sam in an equally loud voice. "I suppose the others have gone on?"

"Certainly," said Tom calmly. "I was a chump to remain behind—only I wanted to find you. I got hold of a letter by accident."

A moment later, they heard the guards walk away, and then Tom told the truth about the letter, and Sam and Dick led him to the hole in the wall.

"It is not quite big enough to use, yet," whispered the eldest Rover. "But we hope to have it big enough by to-morrow. It's slow work, when you have got to be on your guard all the while."

"I'd like to know what became of the detective," returned Tom.

"He must have run away as soon as he saw how affairs were shaping," put in Dick. "I hope he rounds up the whole gang."

"So do I, and Dan Baxter with them," answered Tom.

Overhead, they could hear a constant tramping of feet and murmur of voices. They tried to make out what was being said, but could not.

Left to themselves, the three Rovers turned to the opening that had been made in the wall. A match was lit for a moment, so that Tom could see just what had been done, and then all three set to work to continue the task. It was certainly hard work, and their progress was exasperatingly slow.

"If we only had a pick or a crowbar we could get these stones out in no time," grunted Tom, as he pulled away with all his strength.

The noise overhead continued, and a little later they heard some men come down in another portion of the cellar.

"We must save the plates, at all events," they heard Sack Todd say. "We can't duplicate them, now old Messmer is dead."

"Yes, save the plates, by all means," put in Andy Jimson.

"Do you think the ranch is surrounded?" asked another of the crowd.

"It may be."

"Then the sooner we get out, the better," growled another.

The men passed on, so that the Rover boys could not hear more of the talk.

"I believe they are going to leave the place," whispered Sam excitedly.

"If they go, what will they do with us?" put in Tom.

"Perhaps they will force us to go with them," answered Dick.

There was now more bustle and confusion about the ranch, and they heard a wagon drive up to a door, load up and drive away again. Then some horses were brought up from the stable.

"Something is doing, that is certain," murmured Dick.

He had scarcely spoken when there was a movement at the door of the cell and, by the light of a lantern, the boys found themselves confronted by Sack Todd, Andy Jimson and Dan Baxter.

"So you think the youngest is the best to take along," said Sack Todd to Baxter.

"Yes; the family think more of him than of any one," answered the bully.

"All right. Sam Rover, come out of that!"

"What do you want me for?" asked the youngest Rover.

"I want to talk to you."

Sam walked from the cell, and the door was at once fastened as before.
Then Sack Todd caught the youth by the arm.

"Now, march upstairs, and be lively about it. We have no time to waste."

"But—"

"No 'buts' now, Rover. We'll talk later on," growled the ranch owner savagely. "Just now I've got my mind full of other things."

Sam was led to the main floor of the ranch, and then without ado his hands were fastened behind him. Then he was told to march outside. Here two light wagons were in waiting, and he was bundled into one, along with Jimson and another man, and Dan Baxter. The other wagon was loaded with boxes and driven by two men. Several horses stood by, saddled for use.

"Where are we going?" asked the youngest Rover.

"To the North Pole," chuckled Dan Baxter. "Don't you wish you knew!"

"Are all the men going to leave?"

"That's their business, not yours."

"You are very kind, Baxter. I guess you don't know yourself."

"Don't I, though? Why, I'm right hand-and-hand with this crowd," added the bully boastfully.

"Maybe you only think you are."

"Huh! I know what I am doing."

"You've said that before—and got tripped up, just the same."

"There won't be any trip-up about this."

"Don't be too sure."

"See here," spoke up Andy Jimson. "When we get on the road, all of you have got to keep quiet."

"All right, mum's the world, old man," answered Dan Baxter cheerfully.

"Did you hear?" demanded the long-nosed man, looking at Sam.

"I did."

"Are you going to mind?"

"I am not your slave."

"Humph! Do you know what Todd said to me? He said: 'If the kid won't keep quiet when you tell him, shoot him.' How do you like that?"

"I don't like it."

"I am going to run no chances with you," continued Andy Jimson. "You have got to keep very quiet. Don't you open your mouth once after we get started. I've got a pistol handy, and I know how to use it."

In the meantime, several from the ranch were walking around, talking in low, excited tones. Then, from a distance, came a shot, followed by two more in rapid succession.

"The signal!" cried Sack Todd. "Boys, something is doing now, sure. We must get away, and at once. Are you all ready?"

There was a chorus of assents.

"I think we had better divide. The wagons can go by the honey-tree route, and those on horseback by the swamp road. We can meet at the Four Rocks tomorrow, if all goes well."

So it was agreed, and soon some of the horsemen were off, each carrying a load of some kind. Then the wagons began to move, that with the load of boxes going first. The turnouts plunged at once into the woods, where the darkness was intense. They made scarcely any noise, for the wagons were rubber-tired and the horses wore rubber guards on their shoes.

It would be hard to analyze Sam's feelings as he realized that he was being taken away from the ranch, he knew not to where. To escape in the darkness was out of the question, for the man who sat beside him had his arm linked into his own. More than this, he felt sure that Andy Jimson would shoot him at the first sign of trouble.

The wagon road wound around in the forest, and was in anything but good repair, so that poor Sam was jounced about until he felt sore all over. He did not dare to speak, and, truth to tell, he did not know what to say. He realized that if he asked what was to become of his brothers, nobody would tell him.

Presently the wagon began to climb a slight hill. The horses tugged away manfully, but were exhausted when the top of the rise was gained, and had to rest.

"Hullo, what's that?" exclaimed Dan Baxter as he gazed back in the direction of the ranch.

"Shut up," answered the long-nosed man warningly.

Sam could not help but look back. The top of the rise was almost bare of trees, so his view was a perfect one. The sight that met his gaze caused his heart to sink with a sickening dread.

Red Rock ranch was in flames!

"Tom and Dick!" he murmured to himself. "If they are still prisoners, what will become of them?"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BURNING OF THE RANCH

Left to themselves, Tom and Dick scarcely knew what to do for the time being. What was to become of Sam they did not know, but they felt that the outlook was darker than ever.

"Dick, we must get out!" cried Tom at length. "I can't stand this sort of thing."

"I can't stand it myself. But how are we going to get out? That door is like the wall, for strength."

There was more noise overhead, but presently this ceased, and all became as quiet as a tomb.

"What do you make of it, now?" came from the fun-loving Rover.

"I think they have left the ranch, Tom."

"Left—for good?"

"Perhaps. They know that James Monday will make it warm for them. That letter put them on their guard."

"What a fool I was to deliver it, Dick! I ought to be kicked for doing it. If we had only opened it and read it!"

"The others must still be on the watch."

"Yes, unless they, too, have been captured."

The boys returned to the hole in the wall and, to occupy themselves, dug away at it harder than ever. Another stone was loosened and pulled into the cell.

"We're making a little progress, anyway," sighed Tom.

"Hark! I hear something," said Dick a little later. "Listen!"

They stopped their work and both strained their ears. A curious roaring and crackling came from overhead.

"That's odd," mused Tom. "What do you make of it?"

"I am almost afraid to say, Tom."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. If it is what I think, we may be doomed," went on the eldest Rover seriously.

"Dick! What do you think it is?"

"The crackling of flames. They have set the ranch on fire."

"Would they do that—and leave us here? It is—is inhuman."

"Those men are desperate characters, Tom, and they'd stop at nothing."

They continued to listen, and soon the roaring and crackling grew plainer. Then came a dull thud as some timbers fell, and a current of air carried some smoke into the cell.

"We must get out—somehow, some way!" cried Dick. "If we don't, we'll be caught like beasts in a cage." A sudden thought struck him. "Tom, take up one of the stones."

Dick lit what was left of the candle-wick as he spoke and placed it on the bench. Then he took up the other stone.

"Now, aim for the lock of the door," he went on, "and both throw together. Ready?"

"Yes."

"One, two, three!"

Crash! Both large stones hit the door with tremendous force. The barrier was split from end to end, but still held firm.

"Again!" cried Dick, and once more the stones were hurled in mad desperation. There was an-other crash, and the door tottered and came away from the lock. Then Tom threw his weight against it and it burst open fully.

A rush of hot air and smoke greeted them as they leaped into the passageway. Looking up, they saw that the flooring above was already burning.

"We can't go up through the trap-door," said Dick. "We have got to find some other way out."

"Is there another way?"

"I don't know. Come."

The passageway ran in both directions. They felt their way along for ten feet, to find themselves against another wall.

"The other way!" sang out Tom. "Phew! it's getting pretty warm down here, isn't it?"

"And smoky," answered his brother, beginning to cough.

They passed the cell again and started down the passageway in the opposite direction. Twenty feet further on they reached a wooden door, bolted on the other side.

"Stumped again," muttered Tom. "Dick, what shall we do now?"

"Try to break it down. Now, then, with all your might, Tom!"

It was their only hope, and with increased energy they hurled themselves at the door, which bent and creaked. Then, at the fourth onslaught, the door flew open and they went sprawling into the underground chamber beyond.

Here the light from the blazing building could be plainly seen, and by this they made out that they were in a regular printing office. Three foot-power presses were there, also a quantity of variously colored inks and packages of odd-colored paper.

But they could waste no time in investigating. The burning brands were dropping around them, and they leaped across the printing room to where they saw another passageway. This had a door, but the barrier stood wide open.

"In you go!" sang out Dick. "It must lead somewhere—and, anyway, we can't stay here."

They rushed into the passageway, not an instant too soon, for a second later there came another crash and the printing room was filled with sparks and bits of burning timber. Then a cloud of smoke all but choked them.

Half-blinded, and scarcely knowing what they were doing, the two Rover boys ran on and on, down the passageway. It had several crooks and turns, and more than once they brought up against some stones and dirt in anything but an agreeable fashion. But they felt that they were getting away from the fire and smoke, and that just then meant everything to them.

At last, the danger from the conflagration seemed to be passed, and they slackened their pace, and finally came to a halt. Both were out of breath.

"Whe—where does this lead to?" gasped Tom.

"That's a riddle, Tom. But I know it has taken us away from the fire, which is a blessing."

"Dick, we have had a narrow escape."

"Right you are."

"Those rascals meant to burn us up!"

"They were afraid we knew too much about their affairs."

"They ought to go to jail for this, and Dan Baxter with them."

"I wish we were out of this passageway and could find the rest of our crowd."

"We must find a way out."

This was easier said than done. They went on once more, and soon, without warning, stepped into water up to their knees.

"Back!" cried Dick, who was in advance. "We don't want to get drowned.
That would be as bad as being burnt up."

"We can swim," answered Tom as he scrambled back.

"True, but I want to know where I am swimming to, don't you?"

Tom got out his waterproof match safe and found that it contained just one match. This was lit, and then he set fire to some leaves from a notebook in his pocket. By this light, they saw another turn of the passageway, leading upward.

"That must be a way out," exclaimed Tom, and started in the direction, followed by his brother.

"Now, go slow," warned Dick when they were once more in darkness, the paper having burnt itself out. "We don't want to run into any more danger, if we can avoid it."

"I am on my guard," answered Tom.

They soon found that the side passage narrowed greatly, so that they had to proceed in single file and with heads bent. They moved with their hands in front of their heads, so as to avoid a possible collision with the rocks along the way.

Presently Dick's hand came in contact with something long and straggling. He drew back, thinking he had touched a snake. But then he grew bolder and found it to be a tree root.

"That shows we are close to the surface of the ground," said he. "If the worst comes to the worst, I fancy we can dig our way upward with our hands."

"Maybe, but we don't want this roof to cave in on us, Dick. Come on."

They continued to go forward, but now the passageway was so small that they had to crawl on their hands and knees.

"This looks as if we were going to be blocked, after all," said Tom.

"Something is ahead," whispered Dick. "Be quiet!"

"What do you see?"

"There is an opening, and I can see a little light, and, what is more, I hear the sounds of voices. Maybe we have run into our enemies again!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

FROM ONE SURPRISE TO ANOTHER

Left to themselves in the woods, Fred, Songbird and Hans scarcely knew what to do to fill in their time.

"I must say, I don't like this dividing up at all," remarked Fred, after a half-hour had passed. "First it was Sam and Dick, and now it is Tom. After a while none of us will know where any of the others are. Even the dog has left us." It may be added here that they never saw Wags again.

"Vell, you can't vos plame Tom for drying to find his brudders," came from Hans. "I vos do dot mineselluf, of I peen him."

"I hope Tom steers clear of trouble," said Songbird. "You know how he is—the greatest hand for getting into mischief."

The time dragged heavily on their hands, and when it grew dark not one of them felt like retiring. Songbird tried to put on a cheerful front, but it was a dismal failure, and nobody listened to the rhymes he made half under his breath. 230

At last came a whistle, repeated several times in rapid succession. Then a form emerged out of the darkness.

"Who goes there?" shouted Fred.

"Hullo, boys!" was the answering cry, and James Monday came into the little clearing. "I was afraid I had lost my way."

"Didn't you see Tom?" they asked.

"Yes, I saw him—up to the ranch. He came with a letter, and that spoilt about everything, for it was a warning. They found out who he

was through that Baxter and made him a prisoner. Then I had to sneak away, for I knew they were after me, too."

"Found out you wasn't me, eh?" put in Bill Cashaw. "Thought they might. That crowd is a clever one. Where's my wagon and horses?"

"I had to leave them behind. Here are your hat and coat. I'll thank you to give me my own," went on the government official, and the exchange was quickly made.

The boys asked James Monday many questions, which he answered as best he could. But he was in a hurry, and told them so.

"I want to watch that ranch," he said. "But I'd like one of you to ride to town as hard as you can and take a message for me."

"I'll take the message, if there is anything in it," came quickly from Bill Cashaw.

"No, I want one of the boys to take it. You can go along, if you wish," went on James Monday. He was not quite willing to trust the old man.

The matter was discussed hurriedly, and it was decided that Fred should carry the message, and it was written on a slip of paper which the boy tucked away in an inside pocket. Then off he and the old man started for town, both on horseback.

"The gang at the ranch is a desperate one," said the government official when the pair were gone. "The most I can hope to do is to watch them until help arrives."

"Then you sent for help?" asked Songbird.

"Yes, and if the message is properly delivered, the help will not be long in arriving."

The detective wanted to move closer to the ranch, and Hans and Songbird did as requested, taking the horses with them. They were as anxious to make a move as was the detective, but just then there seemed nothing to do but to wait.

Suddenly Songbird uttered a cry.

"I smell smoke! Can the forest be on fire?"

"Of it vos, ve had besser git owit kvick!" ejaculated Hans. "I ton't vont to burn up, nohow!"

"I see a light," returned James Monday. He ran to where there was a cleared space. "I believe the ranch is on fire!" he gasped.

"It is so!" exclaimed Songbird. "I can see the flames plainly. Now, how did that happen?"

"I don't know. Let us draw closer. I want to see what Sack Todd and his crowd will do."

The government official hurried forward and the two boys followed him, bringing along the horses as before. Soon they were at a spot where they could see the conflagration plainly. To their astonishment, not a soul appeared around the ranch or the outbuildings.

"What does this mean?" asked Songbird. "That gang certainly can't be in the burning building.

"I know what it means!" cried the detective, and there was something like anguish in his voice. "They have abandoned the ranch and set fire to it!"

"Abandoned the ranch?" repeated Songbird.

"Den vot of der Rofer poys?" asked the German youth.

"Don't ask me," said the detective. "They may have escaped, or else —"

He did not finish.

"Do you mean those rascals might leave them in the ranch, prisoners?" asked Songbird.

"It's a hard thing to say, but you know as mush as I do. This knocks my last plan endways. I must see if I can't get on the trail of the gang

that has run away," James Monday added. "Will you let me have one of the horses?"

"Certainly. But—"

"Unless I act quickly, those men may get miles and miles away, and then it will be next to impossible to round them up," continued the government official. "I must go after Fred Garrison and hurry along that extra help."

"Where shall we meet you?"

"I can't tell, exactly. We might—Hullo, what's that?"

A peculiar sound close at hand caused the detective to pause. They heard a flat rock fall down, and then, to their amazement, saw two dirty and begrimed persons emerge from a hole in the ground.

"Who vos dot?" gasped Hans, ready to retreat in fright.

"Hullo, Hans!" cried Tom Rover. "Don't you know Dick and me? We just arrived by the new subway."

"Tom and Dick!" ejaculated Songbird. "Truly, I must be dreaming!"

"But you are not," came from Dick as he stepped closer. "Oh, but I'm glad to get out of that hole!" he added. "And glad to fall among friends once more."

"Hullo, Mr. Monday," said Tom. "So you escaped, after all? That's good. Have any of you seen anything of Sam?"

"Sam?" asked Songbird. "Wasn't he with you?"

"He was, but the counterfeiters carried him off with them when they left the ranch."

"Then he must still be a prisoner."

"Yes."

"When we first heard your voices, we thought we had run into some of our enemies," said Dick. "We were mighty glad to learn otherwise. Now, if Sam was only here—"

"We must find him!" broke in Tom. "And the sooner we get on the trail, the better."

"I was just going away to hurry along some help," came from James Monday. "Maybe all of you had better remain in the forest on guard until I get back. If you spread out, you may learn something."

A little later, the government official hurried off on one of the horses, leaving the boys to themselves. Tom and Dick brushed off their clothing and washed up in a nearby pool of water.

"I think the best thing we can do is to move over to one of the wagon roads," said Dick. "We'll never discover anything in a spot like this."

They moved along, taking turns at riding on the horses left to them. They were still a short distance from one of the trails, when they caught sight of a lantern's gleam, and soon after they heard the low murmur of voices.

"Somebody is over there, that is certain," whispered Dick. "Don't make any noise, fellows!"

Almost holding their breath, they crawled forward through the undergrowth and between the rocks, and presently gained a point where they could see the outline of a wagon. The vehicle had lost one wheel, and they could see three persons moving around it, inspecting the damage done.

"This is the worst luck yet," they heard a man exclaim.

"Well, why didn't you look out for ruts?" said another.

"Look out? How could I look out in such a pitchy darkness?"

"What's to be done?" asked a third voice.

"I don't know, unless we unhook the team and take turns at riding horseback," was the reply.

At this juncture, Dick clutched Tom by the arm.

"Two of those fellows are that Jimson and Dan Baxter!" he whispered. "And do you know who is in the wagon, on the rear seat?"

"No."

"Sam."

CHAPTER XXIX

ON THE TRAIL ONCE MORE

Dick and Tom were delighted to think that they had gotten on the trail of their brother thus readily, and they and their friends withdrew for a short distance, that they might hold a consultation without being overheard by their enemies.

"You are sure it's Sam?" questioned Songbird. "I must say it was so dark I couldn't see him."

"I saw him plainly, just as the lantern was flashed his way," answered Dick. "He had his hands behind him. More than likely they are tied fast, or handcuffed."

"Well, what do you propose?" came from Tom. "I move we go in and attack our enemies rough-shod. It is what they deserve."

"I second the motion," put in Songbird.

"Dot is vell enough to dalk apout," put in Hans. "Put blease ton't forgot dat da pistols haf got, und da can shoot, hey?"

"You've got a pistol, too, Hans."

"Dot is so."

"And I've got one," went on Songbird.

"Dick and I can get rocks and sticks," said Tom. "We'll make it warm for them."

A few words more, and Dick and Tom man-aged to find some sticks and stones which suited their purpose. Then they moved forward once again.

At that moment came a cry from a distance, followed by a pistol shot. The men around the broken-down wagon were instantly on their guard, with pistols and a shotgun.

"Shoot the first man who tries to corner us!" shouted Andy Jimson. "Don't take any chances."

"Wait!" cried Dick to Tom, who was on the point of exposing himself. "Don't show yourself now. Help may be at hand. Besides, those men will shoot as soon as they see us, now."

"What did that shot mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was a signal."

"If we could only let Sam know that we are at hand."

Further words were cut short by another shot, and a moment later four men came riding up at top speed along the wagon trail.

"Hullo, what's up here?" came in the voice of Sack Todd.

"Had a break-down," growled Andy Jimson. "What are you shooting for?"

"Just got word that somebody has gone to town for assistance to round us up. We must change our plans. You'll have to let the wagon stay where it is and take to the horses. Luckily, we have some extra ones along. Be quick."

"What of the prisoner?"

"We'd better let him go."

"Don't you do it!" cried Dan Baxter. "I tell you, you can make money by holding him."

"I'd like to wring Baxter's neck for that!" muttered Tom.

"All right, then, take him along—at least, for the present," said Sack Todd. "But don't waste time. Here are the horses."

The transfer from the wagon to the horses was quickly accomplished. Sam was made to mount a steed, and Andy Jimson rode on one side of him and Dan Baxter on the other. The rest of the men rode in front and in the rear, and soon the spot where the break-down had occurred was left behind.

"Now, what's to do?" asked Tom ruefully. He realized, as well as the others, that it would have been useless to have attacked such a large crowd.

"There is but one thing to do, Tom: follow them. As soon as they locate, we can go back for help. They can't travel more than twenty-four hours without stopping, and I believe they'll go into hiding as soon as it is daylight."

With care, they advanced on the trail of those ahead. This was a rather difficult task, for the lantern had been put out, and it was pitch-dark tinder the trees. More than once their steeds went into a hollow with a jounce that threatened to throw one or another to the ground.

"If only James Monday would appear with about ten men," sighed Tom.
"Couldn't we make it warm for those chaps!"

"He won't be coming back for a long time," said Songbird. "He is no wizard, even if he is a detective. It is only in the sensational, five-cent libraries that the noble detective turns up every time he is needed."

"Yes, and kills about ten men hand-running," added Tom with a laugh.

At the end of an hour's ride through the forest, all of the boys were so fagged out they could scarcely keep on horseback. It must be remembered that they had to take turns at riding, there not being enough steeds to go around.

"I wish they'd come to a stop," muttered Songbird. "I declare, if I ever get the chance, I'm going to rest for a week!"

"Ton't say a vord," groaned Hans. "I vos so lame I can't most sit up alretty!"

"Let us be thankful if they don't discover that we are following them," said Dick. "If they did find it out, they would certainly make it warm for us."

A little while later the forest was left behind, and the party ahead and that in the rear came out on the broad and rolling prairies. It was growing cloudy, so that the boys kept their enemies in sight with difficulty, not daring to draw too close.

Far away, they could see the lights of a town gleaming, but these were soon lost to view around a bit of rising ground. Then they forded a small stream and began to climb the slope of a small hill, at the top of which were a series of rocks. Here they fancied the counterfeiters might halt, but they were disappointed. The crowd ahead toiled over the hill and then struck off across an-other section of the rolling plains.

"I can't ride much further," said Tom at last. "I am so tired I am ready to drop."

"Ditto here," came from Songbird.

Nevertheless, they kept on, and thus was the shadowing continued until four o'clock in the morning, when the party ahead came to a patch of timber on the side of a steep hill. Here, among the trees and rocks, they went into a temporary camp.

The boys had come as close as they dared, and reaching a convenient hillock with a clump of bushes, dismounted and threw themselves on the ground.

"They are going into camp, sure enough," announced Dick after a careful inspection. "Now, the question arises: what is best to do next?"

"I know what ought to be done," answered his brother, "but I am too tired to do it."

"Go for help?" asked Songbird.

"Exactly. But I could no more ride back to town than I could fly."

"Dot is vot's der madder mit me," put in Hans. "I could schleep standing ub, ain't it!"

"Well, I'll go for help, then," said Dick. "But I must have one of the horses."

"Take the best of them, Dick."

The eldest Rover inspected the animals, and finally chose one that looked fairly fresh.

"Now, mind, don't get into more trouble while I am gone," he said. "If they move on, simply keep them in sight."

A few minutes later, Dick took his departure, moving straight for the town they had seen earlier in the night. He knew nothing of the trails, but trusted to luck not to go astray.

"I've got to make that town," he told himself. "And do it without wasting time, too."

Soon he found himself utterly alone on the plains, and, urging his horse forward at the steed's best rate of speed—a gallop that was anything but easy to the worn-out youth. But Dick was not thinking of himself. His mind was on Sam, and how his youngest brother might be rescued.

"Whoa, there!"

The command was a most unexpected one, coming from out of the darkness, and at the word Dick's horse came to a standstill. For the instant the youth could see nobody, but then two horsemen hove into sight, each heavily armed.

At first, Dick could not make out who they were, but as they drew nearer his heart sank within him. One of the newcomers was a man he had seen working around Red Rock ranch and the other was the negro

called Watermelon Pete, the fellow who had given the Rovers trouble while on the houseboat.

CHAPTER XXX

A ROUND-UP-CONCLUSION

The man from Red Rock ranch was very much startled to see Dick, and stared at the youth for several seconds without speaking.

The eldest Rover thought for an instant of putting his horse to flight, but then realized with a pang that the animal would not be equal to the task.

"Where under the sun did you come from?" growled the man at last.

"It's dat same fellah!" cried Watermelon Pete. "I dun see him on de ribber an' at de ranch, too!"

"Yes, the fellow who was left in a cell at Red Rock," returned the white man. "How did you escape?" he went on, to Dick.

"Smashed the door and came out in a hurry," answered Dick. He saw no harm in telling the truth.

"Where is your brother?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"Don't get funny with me," growled the man.

"Are you alone?" he continued, peering around in the darkness.

"You had better find out."

"Why don't you finish him off, Puller?" came from the negro. "Ain't nobody else around."

"You're a fine rascal!" burst out Dick. "If you touch me, there is going to be trouble."

"I reckon you'll come with me," said the white man harshly. "We ain't goin' to run no risks, understand? If you put anybody on our trail—" He did not finish. "Face around there!" he ordered.

"See here, do you think you are treating me fairly?" asked Dick. He wished to gain time, so that he could think matters over and decide what was best to do.

"I won't parley the question," growled the man. "Face around and do it quick, if you want to save your hide."

There was no help for it, and Dick faced around. As he did so, he caught the sounds of hoof strokes at a distance. Puller and Water-melon Pete did not appear to notice them.

"Wait a minute, I dropped something," said the eldest Rover, and slid to the ground. He pre-tended to search around. "Got a light?"

"What did you drop?"

"Something valuable," said Dick, but did not add that it was only a harness buckle. He was straining his ears and heard the hoof strokes coming closer.

"Well, hurry up and find it. We are not going to stay here until the sun comes up," growled Puller.

A moment later, the sounds of horses approaching could be heard plainly. Dick began to cough loudly, but the ears of the negro could not be deceived.

"Listen!" he said warningly. "Hosses comin', suah as yo' is boahn!"

"Horses?" cried the white man. "Then we had better make tracks."

"Who is there?" cried Dick at the top of his voice. If they were enemies, he knew he could be no worse off.

"Shut your mouth!" howled the white man.

"Hullo!" was the answering call, and in a moment several men dashed up, all heavily armed, and accompanied by James Monday and Fred Garrison.

"Help!" called out Dick. "Don't let them get away!"

"They are not going to catch me!" growled Puller, and struck his horse in the side. The animal bounded forward and was followed by that on which the negro was riding. Scarcely had this been done when a shot rang out and the negro fell from his saddle to the ground.

"Halt, in the name of the law!" cried James Monday to Puller, but the man paid no attention. Several shots were fired at him, but soon the gloom of early morning hid him from view.

"I'm more than glad that you have come," cried Dick to the government official and Fred. "How did you get here so quickly?"

"It was mostly luck," answered the detective. "Garrison delivered the message to just the right party and I ran into the crowd just coming away from the town. We have got nine men here, and all willing to do their utmost to round up that Red Rock ranch gang."

It was soon learned that Watermelon Pete had been hit in the thigh. The wound was not a fatal one, but it was destined to put the rascal in the hospital for some time to come.

"You must follow that fellow who got away, and at once," said Dick to James Monday, and then he told of what had happened during the night and of where Sack Todd and his confederates were located.

Leaving his tired horse behind him, the eldest Rover mounted the animal Watermelon Pete had been riding, and the whole party, minus the negro, who was left to take care of himself for the time being, started for the rendezvous of the counterfeiters.

"If you do any shooting, be careful and don't hit my brother Sam," said Dick.

"I'll warn the men," answered James Monday, and did so.

Dick was so tired he could scarcely sit up in the saddle. But he longed to see Sam rescued, and so rode along as best he could.

As they neared the spot where Tom and his friends were in waiting, they heard a faint shout and soon the fun-loving Rover appeared. He had heard the distant firing when Watermelon Pete was hit and was afraid Dick had been wounded.

"Good! good!" he shouted when he recognized Dick and the government official and Fred. "This is the best yet. Now, I hope we can round up that whole crowd."

They continued to advance, and as they did so they heard a firing at a distance, in the direction of the counterfeiters' rendezvous.

"Something has gone wrong there," cried Dick.

Something had gone wrong, and to the advantage of the Rovers, as Dick and Tom afterwards learned. Sam had been left to take care of himself for a few minutes, and by a dexterous twist of his wrists had managed to rid himself of the rope which bound him.

Watching a favorable moment, the youngest Rover slid behind a rock and then began to run at his best rate of speed for another shelter some distance away.

As soon as his flight was discovered some men went in pursuit, and two shots were fired at the boy, one grazing his left shoulder, but leaving only a scratch.

The counterfeiters would have continued to pursue the fleeing one, but now a new alarm sounded out and a guard rushed up.

"A posse is after us!" called the guard. "We have got to fight, or ride for it."

"Let us fight!" exclaimed Sack Todd, but this proposition was voted down, as it was not known how many were after the evildoers.

Sack Todd was the last man to leap into the saddle. As he did so, he gritted his teeth hard.

"They shan't capture me!" he muttered. "I am not to be taken alive!"

Away went the crowd at a breakneck speed, Dan Baxter in their midst. But at the first opportunity the bully turned to the southward and he disappeared when a patch of timber was gained.

"This is too hot for me," he muttered. "I guess the best thing I can do is to get out of this neighborhood and skip for parts unknown for a while." And then he urged his horse still further to the southward, until the mists in a swamp in the midst of the timber hid him completely from view.

Having escaped from his captors, Sam hardly knew what to do, but, as he heard a number of shots fired, he made up his mind that help must be at hand, and so he hurried back on the trail, and presently came in sight of the other boys. Then he set up a mad shout of joy, which they quickly echoed.

"Are you perfectly safe, Sam?" asked Dick, riding up.

"Yes, although I had a narrow escape," and the youngest Rover pointed to where the bullet had grazed his shoulder. "What of the others?"

"All safe and sound," sang out Tom, coming up. "And James Monday and a big posse are after Sack Todd and his crowd hot-footed."

"Shall we join in?" asked Songbird.

"I can't go another step," answered Dick. "I am more than tired," and he sank in a heap on the saddle.

"You boys stay here, and we'll fix those rascals," cried a man of the posse. "You have done enough."

"I guess we have," said Tom. "We are safe and sound, and that is the main thing, so far as we are concerned."

Here let me add a few words more and then bring to a close this tale of "The Rover Boys on the Plains."

Utterly worn out, the boys remained where they were until noon of the day which was now dawning. At a great distance, they heard pistol and gun shots, and they knew that some sort of a fight must be going on.

They were just preparing to move for town, when they saw two of the posse returning with three prisoners, each disarmed and with his hands bound behind him. One of the prisoners was Puller and another Andy Jimson.

"We are going to get most of them," said one of the posse to the boys. "But they are a pretty desperate lot."

The prisoners were placed in charge of the Rovers and their friends, and the whole party moved for town without delay, while the men of the posse went back to continue the hunt for the counterfeiters. In the end, every man but Sack Todd was captured. Dan Baxter was tracked to the edge of the swamp, and there his horse was found, stuck in the ooze, Nearby lay the hat of the bully.

"My opinion is that Baxter lost his life trying to get through the swamp," said James Monday after the hunt had come to a finish.

"What a horrible end," said Sam, and shivered.

"Perhaps he did lose his life," was Dick's comment. "But I shan't believe it until I have the direct evidence. I guess, though, I've seen the last of my watch," he added.

A search was kept up for several days for Baxter, but it brought no further traces of the misguided youth.

"He is gone, that's sure," said Tom. "I must say, I never thought he'd have such an ending as this!"

James Monday was much chagrined to think that Sack Todd had slipped him, but he was much elated when one of the posse found

several pack-ages among the rocks. These packages contained all of the printing plates used in the manufacturing of the counterfeit bank notes.

"The plates are what the government wants, most of all," he told the boys. "They were made by an old engraver who was once in the employ of the government. The man is too old and shaky to make other plates, and as Sack Todd isn't an engraver himself, it's not likely he will attempt to go into the business again."

As soon as all the criminals were properly jailed and the boys had given their testimony, they obtained a good night's rest and then set off for Carson Denton's plantation. The remainder of the trip proved uneventful, and when they reached their destination they felt in the best of spirits once more. The news of what had occurred had preceded them, and they were looked upon as heroes by the girls and Mrs. Laning and Mrs. Stanhope.

"But you mustn't get into any such trouble again," said Dora to Dick.

"Think, if you had been burnt up at that fire!" cried Nellie.

"Or if those bad men had shot you," added Grace.

"Well, we came out of it with a whole skin," said Tom, "so we need not complain."

"And I guess, with Baxter gone, our troubles are about over," said Sam. But he was mistaken in his surmise, as we shall learn in the next volume of this series, entitled "The Rover Boys in Southern Waters; or, The Deserted Steam Yacht." In this volume we shall meet all of our young friends again and learn the particulars of a most peculiar happening.

When the proper time came, the rascals who had been captured were tried and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. All that remained of Red Rock ranch was confiscated by the government, and the paper and printing machinery were destroyed.

While at the plantation, the boys had much sport hunting and fishing and riding. The girls often went along; and all too soon it was announced that the houseboat was once more ready for use, and the brief outing ashore must come to an end.

"Well, take it all in all, we have had a good time," said Dick

"Yes," answered Sam, "although we had a little more excitement than we bargained for."

"Excitement!" came from Tom. "Pooh! Life wouldn't be worth living without some excitement."

And then he set up a merry whistle; and with that whistle let us bring this story to a close.

THE END

THE ROVER BOYS

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